

Journey to glory



DEAR READER:

In every adventure, there's ups and downs. The hero fails to save someone, the chosen one loses their mentor, the party breaks apart. While our zine's story is not quite as dramatic as the fantastic tales you'll find within, it is one that struggled to exist. Our original zine, *Bnha: Honor and Glory*, was abandoned by our mods after pre-orders, leaving us and our buyers in limbo.

Yet, we didn't want the journey to end there. We wanted to present you something tangible, some proof of the hard work and love we poured into making this zine. So we called upon our contributors once more, to try to get this right one more time. While we lost some friends along the way, we gained many more, so that we could create this new, updated zine. It has been a learning process, but where our mods left us disappointed, our contributors reminded us that there are still heroes in the world. People willing to step up and help, even without being asked.

At the end of every adventure, there's treasure, and here is yours: the zine. Please read through it and join us on our *Journey to Glory*.

**~WITH LOVE FROM THE JOURNEY TO GLORY
TEAM**





FLY WITH ME

BY AZUNSHI

“When will the guests be leaving?”

Momo turns to look at the disgruntled person by her side. As the village chief’s daughter, she’s required to maintain her placid smile in public, even as she lightly arches her eyebrows. Her voice is well below the music but loud enough for her companion to hear. “Do they bother you?”

Kyouka simply huffs in response. Firelight flickers in her half-lidded, triangular eyes that are focused at a point somewhere across her. Her expression appears unreadable but Momo detects the subtle downward curve at the corners of her lips.

“They don’t,” Kyouka murmurs, “but the one who bears the Kaminari clan’s symbol has been snooping around today.”

Momo returns her gaze to the guests. She recalls her first impression of the great alchemist Aizawa Shouta and his two apprentices. In Aizawa, she had expected to see a man who radiates a strong and stately aura, only to be underwhelmed by a weary-looking man with lank, greasy hair. His apprentices are hardly impressive either; the purple-haired one carries a sort of snobbish air about him, with his bored expression and upturned nose. His peer, the blond boy Kyouka referenced, is overly excitable and obnoxiously loud.

At the guests’ side of the table, the Kaminari boy is stuffing his face like he’ll never see food again. While reaching for a large turkey drumstick, he catches the girls’ eyes. For the briefest second, his eyes widen. Then his lips pull back into a beaming grin. He waves at them, obviously delighted by the attention he’s receiving.

At the sound of Kyouka’s irritation, Momo suppresses a laugh. “As long as he doesn’t cause more trouble than he’s worth,” says Momo to Kyouka as she waves back on their behalf, “I believe we need not fret.”

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The usual grogginess greets Kyouka when she wakes to pale morning light entering her room through the round window by her bed, casting a pool of light on her face. Birdsong, punctuated by other early morning sounds like the sleepy good-mornings of her neighbors and the punch of hooves along the dirt path in front of her house, pull her out of hazy sleep.

Rolling her head to work out the crick in her neck, she swings her feet off the mattress to the floor. When she emerges from her room, she finds the house empty. Her parents must’ve left for work, her father to the forges and her mother to the apothecary. She has a meager breakfast of a slice of bread with some cheese. There’s an apple but she decides to save it for lunch.

On an ordinary day, mornings would be spent helping her parents at work; in the afternoons, she'd run errands; evenings would be reserved for winding down, with either her family or Momo. On an ordinary day, no one would disrupt her simple routine.

Today could've been like any other ordinary day if Kyouka hadn't found that Kaminari boy standing at the footstep.

Kyouka shuts the door on his beaming face. Waits a few stuttering heartbeats, then opens it again. He's still standing there, the grin hasn't wavered from his face, and his mouth is opening. "Greetings—" She shuts the door again, but this time he jams his foot to prevent it from closing all the way. "Hey!"

Kyouka pushes the door with her shoulder, hoping to squash his foot with the door but it doesn't work. Detachedly, she wonders why he's here at all; it would've made more sense if he visited Momo since she was the one waving at him at the feast last night. Racking her brain to translate her words into the speech of the court, she hisses, "Get thee gone out of my sight!"

A beat of silence passes between them. "You know you don't have to use fancy royal talk with me, right?" asks the Kaminari boy, sounding amused. Kyouka's push on the door weakens slightly in surprise.

"Do you not work with the royals?"

"Yeah, but I only have to use it when they're around. And I'm not royal, am I? My apologies," says the outsider, "I shouldn't have stood at your doorstep like a madman."

Kyouka rolls her eyes, muttering that he can repeat the madman part again.

"I'm Denki of the Kaminari clan," he continues. "Y'know, one of the Northern clans with the lightning symbol." Kyouka knows; she's seen their convoys once in her life and they're cold and haughty people. Denki is the stark opposite of them, perhaps due to being brought up in a different environment—after all, alchemists start their training at an early age, away from their family.

"Jirou." Kyouka doesn't trust Denki enough to say her given name. With one hand on the doorknob, she pulls the door back open slowly, her other hand gripping the hilt of her sheathed sword at her waist, to see if Denki will barge into her home. He doesn't; the creepy enthusiastic grin he wore has faded into a sheepish smile.

He's dressed differently from last night; instead of a long deep blue trench coat worn over a dark shirt and trousers, he's dressed in a simple off-white tunic under a brown vest with matching trousers and worn-looking boots. It's somewhat unsettling to see how he resembles the town's boys rather than an outsider.

"State your business," Kyouka huffs, trying to ignore her train of thought, "and make it quick."

"I heard you're one of the Dragonriders of this village." Denki regards her with curious interest. "Is that true?" The slight doubt in his tone earns a sharp glare from her.

When Kyouka confirms his suspicions, Denki stares at her with admiration. She's not used to attention like this; her cheeks flush with color and her gaze averts to the floor. When she expressed her wishes to become a Dragonrider years ago, she was met with criticism and contempt.

Denki stumbles back, almost tripping over his own feet, as she steps out of the house. A stream of barely comprehensible words escapes him, sentences blurring together into an excited babble that cuts into Kyouka's thoughts.

In the distance, the half-bell rings, informing her she's behind schedule today. She doesn't have the patience to deal with Denki, who's following her like a shadow. "Don't you have alchemist apprentice things to do today?" she asks, voicing her annoyance.

The excitement rushes out of Denki like a rapidly deflating puffball. His mouth hangs open as he stares at her. "N-no." It almost sounds like a question. "Master said we're free to explore the town for today."

"So go explore." Kyouka shoos him away. "And please don't bother me." She's pleased to note he doesn't follow her when she looks over her shoulder later.

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It's short-lived, Kyouka's relief that Denki has left her alone. The boy is as persistent as he is annoying. He shows up in almost every place she is for several days; at the forges to order some tools for Aizawa; at the apothecary for herbal salves for the other apprentice; even at the town square where he gets along famously with the girls.

Kyouka pretends he doesn't exist whenever they cross paths, keeping her gaze averted or her attention elsewhere. There's something about his directness, from the other day, that insists she avoids him.

After a hike through the woods that takes her till late afternoon, she emerges into the clearing she has claimed as her secret spot for the past few years. It's been a week since she last came here. It's the only place Denki doesn't appear, which she is grateful for: it already feels like she doesn't have her own space with him lurking around.

From her bag, she pulls out a turkey she caught on along the way. Craning her head upwards, she whistles sharply, cutting into the background noise of birds and insects.

Suddenly, a hush falls upon the forest when a large dark shadow swoops across the sky above. With her hand shaded over her eyes, Kyouka grins as she hears the winged creature's call, a high and clear sound that brings a rush of exhilaration through her veins.

The creature circles in the air above the clearing. Almighty gusts and the loud beating of wings grow stronger as it nears the ground. It lands, displacing a cloud of dust and steam. The dragon stretches its neck proudly, regarding Kyouka with pale yellow eyes. Its wings are unfurled, casting its shadow over her. Its opalescent scales glitter in the rich gold sunlight as it slithers up to her.

Kyouka holds the turkey out to the dragon's snout. Up close, she smells the faint whiff of sulfur on its breath. The dragon eyes her offering before it snaps forward. Only years of training and trust keeps Kyouka from recoiling as the dragon snatches the turkey and swallows it in a single gulp. Then it burps, a little puff of steam escaping from its mouth.

Kyouka laughs before throwing her arms around the dragon's neck. She rubs her dragon behind its ear, murmuring greetings. A delighted thrum passes through the dragon as it nuzzles her side.

Kyouka's mouth opens to say something when her dragon stiffens and releases low, aggressive growls. She lifts her hand from her dragon, pulse quickening, as she spins on her heel. She draws her sword. Her dragon's attention is fixated on a thicket ahead and left of her. If she didn't know any better, she would've ignored the warning. She squints, ignoring her heart pounding against her chest, and steps forward tentatively. "Who's there?" she calls, holding her sword point-up. "Show yourself."

Everything is silent, save for the resonating growls behind her, when Kyouka catches the slightest hint of movement within the bushes. She darts forward, slashing her blade across the foliage when a surprised cry erupts from it. A head pops from above the clump right before the body attached to it tumbles over backwards. The cry turns into sharp yelps of pain.

Kyouka races around the bush to the other side, her sword raised. And then she stops once she recognizes the intruder, who lies in a heap with his body halfway out of the bush.

"You," she huffs.

Denki smiles sheepishly.

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"I'm sorry I spooked your dragon."

Kyouka doesn't respond to Denki's feeble apology. He casts a furtive look towards her dragon, curled up at a respectable distance from them; its yellow eyes glare at him from the dappled shadows cast by trees. "And you," he adds.

The stream gurgles along, crystal clear water flowing gently in its path. Kyouka lifts her full waterskin, twisting the cap.

"You should've stayed out of the woods," she says. "There are dangerous beasts here and nobody stands a chance unarmed." To emphasize, Kyouka pats her sword strapped to her belt and gestures at his lack of a visible weapon. "And, I should mention that I don't like being followed. Don't think I didn't notice the past few days."

Denki laughs faintly. "I've done the unthinkable." Other than the cuts from the sharp branches in the bush, he seems fine. "I've been in the woods all day and I had no idea you'd be here at all." At her skepticism, he explains, "I heard from the locals saying this is the best place to look for dragons. That's all."

At his explanation, Kyouka's frown deepens. "Why are you so fixated on dragons, anyway?"

Denki turns away from her. In the sunlight falling over the stream, his hair turns to the color of molten gold. He mumbles something she doesn't catch and when she demands he speak up, he says, "Please don't tell anyone. You too." He whirls around to Kyouka's dragon, who rolls its eyes at him. "Don't go around telling your dragon friends!"

Soon convinced neither of them is going to tell anybody, he says, "I'm obsessed with dragons."

"That's news," replies Kyouka.

"Right? Oh, you're being sarcastic." Denki straightens up. "Anyway, I've been reading plenty of books about them since I learned they existed." He points at Kyouka's dragon and names its breed, its habits, how to care for it and more. He also names the other breeds that inhabit the area surrounding Kyouka's town and how to find them.

Kyouka is impressed though she'd rather chop her own foot than to admit it. "If you like dragons so much," she begins without much thought, "why are you an alchemist?"

Denki averts his gaze. "It's a long story. But if you must know, it's because I didn't have a choice." For the first time since they've met, his voice lacks its usual cheeriness.

Kyouka doesn't press him for details.

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Since Kyouka can't leave Denki to fend for himself, she allows him to tag along until midnight when she'll drop him off at the village. When she tells him this, Denki's returned to being his usual self: loud and excitable. He asks her why she can't do it now and she says, "Most of them haven't seen a dragon for real. How do you think they'd react?"

"Surprised. Ow!" Denki winces when she punches his arm.

With her initial plans for the evening out the window, Kyouka makes do. They set up camp in the clearing to prepare for the night. Though she is determined not to give him the satisfaction of thinking she'd forgiven him for stalking her, she does think he's good company. He's more than willing to help out, in exchange for bits of information about her dragon.

When the last rays of the sun fade from the treetops, he's gathered quite a lot for their meal: big juicy fish, berries, and tubers he found along the river. They make a hearty meal out of it and that's when they trade tales. Or at least, Denki does as Kyouka listens.

He's in the middle of telling her about how he thwarted the frost giants from the north, imitating their clumsy gait and their gruff noises, when a little noise escapes Kyouka. Denki stops, eyes rounding but her hand is clamped over her mouth.

“Don’t —” Kyouka begins warningly when Denki lights up with a smile brighter than the campfire.

“You laughed!”

“I didn’t.”

“Ok, fine. You giggled.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

They get into a playful argument over the variations of laugh when Denki grins lopsidedly, puffing out his chest. “I always knew you thought I was funny.”

“Pfft, don’t flatter yourself,” scoffs Kyouka but she’s glad it’s dark enough to hide her blush. In an attempt to redirect his attention, Kyouka gets up with the pretense of checking on her dragon’s saddle. Her dragon gives her a meaningful look, to which she rolls her eyes and hisses, “Don’t tease me.” The dragon snorts and rests its head back on the ground.

“So, what do you want to hear next? The time I managed to set fireproof underwear on fire, or the time when I accidentally transmuted Shinsou’s Potion of Invisibility into a live chicken?”

Kyouka pauses. “Could you tell me what being an alchemist is like? If you want to,” she adds, seeing Denki’s hesitation.

“Well, it’s not an easy job but it pays well,” begins Denki. “And you need to have exceptional talent and aptitude otherwise you’re never going to be able to perform alchemy.”

He then explains to her the basics of alchemy training and what alchemists usually do. He does his best to make it sound lighthearted but Kyouka can tell his is a heavy responsibility to bear, especially since he’s training to become a Royal Alchemist.

“I didn’t realize it was that hard,” Kyouka admits.

Denki shrugs. His excitable energy seems to be muted now as he stares thoughtfully into the distance. “I didn’t choose to be an alchemist’s apprentice. But my fate was sealed when I discovered my abilities.”

He smiles but it’s a forlorn one, one that reaches through Kyouka in a way that makes her chest ache in sympathy for him.

She and her dragon exchange a look before she rises to her feet to put out the fire. Denki doesn’t give an indication he’s noticed the movement, still staring off, until Kyouka nudges him with the tip of her boot. He cranes his head back to look at her, eyebrows arched in question.

Kyouka jabs her thumb at her dragon in reply. He frowns, glancing from her to her dragon. “What’s wrong?” he asks.

“Get on the dragon, stupid,” she huffs, pulling her foot back threateningly. Denki’s eyes widen as he scrambles to his feet. His shocked expression melts away into excited joy. Kyouka sighs in exasperation but the corners of her mouth twitches into a grin.

They secure their belongings on the dragon’s back before Kyouka gives him instructions on how to mount her dragon. “It’s not like getting on a horse,” she warns. “Also, don’t pull on the scales.” Denki listens attentively before he attempts to mount; it takes a few tries and a few impatient grunts from her dragon but in a minute, he’s sitting astride on the dragon’s back.

“This is so cool!” Denki exclaims, holding the reins. “I can’t believe I’m going to ride a dragon!”

Kyouka mounts behind Denki, reaching around him for the reins. And Denki suddenly goes stock-still. Thinking he’s nervous, she leans close to him, her warm breath tickling his hair and ear. “Relax,” she says softly, “we haven’t even started flying yet.”

Denki squeaks something in reply when Kyouka gives the tiniest flick of the reins. One moment her dragon tenses, muscles bunching up, and the next it takes off in a mighty beat of its wings.

The wind roars in their ears and whips at their faces. Denki’s scream and Kyouka’s whoop melt together as they soar higher and higher until eventually they’ve climbed to a suitable height. All of Denki’s muscles have gone rigid. Kyouka wonders if his heart is somewhere on the ground.

Kyouka leans back from Denki to give him some room then asks, “Are you alright there?”

“Terrified!” he answers but his tone betrays him.

“Look down!”

He stares at her over his shoulder like she’s gone mad. “Normal people don’t tell others to look down when they’re really high up.”

“I’m a Dragonrider, and you’re an alchemist-in-training. I doubt normal people choose these sorts of occupations.”

“I’m not even going to argue.” Kyouka sees Denki’s shoulders square slightly before he risks a glance below. They’re cruising at constant speed over the forested lands below. A river snakes through it, curving haphazardly at each bend. Clouds brush above their heads, their hair catching fine droplets of water from the passage.

Hesitantly, Denki releases his grip on the reins and holds his arms out at the sides, as though they are outspread wings. A few beats pass before he breaks into awestruck laughter. “We’re flying!” he whoops. “We’re literally flying!”

Once he's calmed down, Kyouka mentions air maneuvers. "No thanks. I'm good with flying like this," he tells her and she laughs again.

All too soon, the town appears in sight. "Well, I guess we'd better get ready for landing then," says Denki, though somehow neither of them wants to.

The dragon descends in the middle of the town square, stirring up clouds of dust before it settles on the ground. Kyouka slides off before offering her hand to help Denki down. He clasps it firmly and gets off clumsily, almost crashing into her. "Sorry—"

They're nose-to-nose, her arms wrapped around him. They stare at each other, wide-eyed, before breaking apart. Heat rushes into Kyouka's face. It's Denki who breaks the silence.

"Well, that was amazing." He grins at her but there's a softness to his eyes Kyouka hasn't noticed before.

"Yeah," she says and she can't stop smiling back. "I'd be happy to give you flying lessons, if you'd like."

Denki's eyes widen. "You would?"

"Same time next week in the forest?" she offers.

"You bet I'll be there!"





TRAINING

BY LORA B

Mina left the inn her party was staying in, closing the door without caring about how loud it was. It wouldn't have been heard anyway— the energy within the inn was in full swing as the inhabitants fell further into their festivities. Even with a door between her and the party, she could hear their joyful yelling as if they were right next to her.

Normally these sorts of things would totally be up her alley; but right now she couldn't enjoy it. Not after what happened during their last mission. She could still see the jaws of the beast surrounding Kirishima, getting ready to snap. If it hadn't been for Bak—

She took a deep breath of the cool night air. She couldn't dwell on that.

She needed to train. That only happened because she had been slacking on it the past few weeks. But that wouldn't happen again.

Mina stepped away from the inn's door and started walking through the nearby forest until she came to a clearing. The clearing was almost as big as the inn, with a small pond near one end of it with some moss covered logs. The ground was pretty tough and surprisingly even, as if someone had been planning to use it for something. Oh well, they weren't here now so it wouldn't hurt for her to use it to train tonight.

She grabbed one of the logs, shoving it upright before slamming it into the ground. Mina pushed it a few times, testing to see how well it would stay in the ground. Once she was sure it wouldn't move she got into position.

It was time to train.

One punch, two punches, twist, kick!

She picked up the pace—added more to the regimen.

One punch, two punches, twist, kick! Punch, grab, twist, throw!

Her breath came out in bursts. She added more power to her hits.

One punch, two punches, twist-

"You practice a lot don't you, kero?"

Mina mistimed her swing and missed the target by just a hair, falling awkwardly from the momentum of her movement. Letting out a low groan, she slowly got back up.

Mina looked around, trying to figure out where the voice had come from. But she didn't see anyone.

"That looked like it hurt, kero."

The voice returned behind her. Mina turned slightly, just enough to see who it might be.

A girl with green hair and wearing a simple green apron over a white dress with red stripes on its skirt stood behind her, looking curious. It took Mina a second to recognize her—she was often at the inn the group came to, either working or trading stories with the group over meals. She herself had swapped several stories with her, enjoying how Tsuyu weaved her tales like a silk web across her audience's minds—capturing everyone's attention in the threads.

She spoke again, breaking Mina from her thoughts. "Sorry for startling you, kero. I just noticed you had seemed upset when you left and thought maybe you'd like someone to talk to."

Mina didn't respond, instead dusting off and getting back into position. She didn't need to talk, she needed to train! She couldn't let herself be distracted again and ignore it— couldn't let her slacking off hurt her friends.

She slid her foot back across the dirt, winded up her fist, and started to swing it forward—

"What are you training for, kero?"

Her fist flew right past the wooden post and she let out a yell of frustration. Mina glared at the other girl as she screamed, "Why do you care?!"

Silence filled the clearing as a thoughtful look came across Tsuyu's face. She didn't speak for a while, choosing her words carefully when she finally did. "You and your party come to the inn after every adventure, kero. I've gotten to know you guys pretty well now—your victories, your defeats, even what colors you guys love. You and I have even shared stories. I've gotten pretty close to you guys... I'd even consider us friends, kero. Why wouldn't I be worried when a friend who seems upset runs off into the woods?"

Mina didn't know how to answer that. She sat down on the ground and opened her mouth to speak but when nothing came out she closed it and looked away. How could she explain her worries to someone who saw their victory as only a victory? How could she tell her about the fear of failing her party—no her friends—that held her heart within its icy grip like a cage? She wasn't like Todoroki, who had both power and smarts behind him, or like Deku who had a magic sword! She just had her strength and during that battle it didn't help.

"Something happened during our last battle... something that could have ended badly."

Tsuyu sat down beside her. "You guys won though, didn't you? That's what your team is celebrating in the tavern, kero. So why do you feel you need to train instead of celebrate? Did something happen, kero?"

Softly she spoke. "...during the battle, I got sloppy. And because of that one of my teammates almost died."

"Ah. That's definitely a reason to feel like you need to practice more, kero. You're afraid that if you don't they could be hurt."

It wasn't a question, but Mina nodded an affirmative anyway.

Tsuyu let out a small hum. "Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"What exactly happened that you see as your fault, kero?"

It was a simple question. One Mina understood why she asked.

That didn't stop the effect it had on her.

That simple question caused what little of the barrier she had built within her mind between her and the adventure to snap like a twig.

The words erupted from Mina like lava as she thought about the battle, "I lost the beast's aggro! I was so focused on moving it to Todoroki's trap that I didn't even realize it had left until one of my friends almost died! If it hadn't been for Bakugou, Kirishima would have died..."

Her voice tapered off at the end, and she buried her face in her knees.

The tension in the clearing was suffocating, as was the silence. Maybe that's why it took so long for Tsuyu to softly ask, "Is that what you think?"

Mina's head snapped up and she quickly turned towards the other girl. "It's the truth!"

"That's not what they seem to think." Mina felt a bit of her anger fade, replaced by confusion as she continued to listen to Tsuyu. "Did you hear how the others told the story?"

"...I didn't want to be reminded of what happened."

"I understand that; but it might have been a good idea if you did. If you had you'd know that the trap had broken, kero."

...it had what?

Tsuyu must have seen the shock on her face, because she nodded and continued to speak. "Someone accidentally set it off too early, so they had to set up another one. They couldn't use the old area because of the debris so they moved the area it was in. But, you and the others had already left to get it to follow you so they couldn't tell you. Someone else would have to lead it to the new trap, and Kirishima volunteered..."

"He got the beast's aggro on purpose." They both finished.

"So... it wasn't my fault." Mina felt a giddy smile spread across her face as she finally realized what Tsuyu had realized, probably even before she came to the clearing. She jumped up, yelling with excitement. "I'm still the best barbarian in the party!"

Tsuyu rolled her eyes at her excitement, but there was a small smile on her face as she asked, "Aren't you the only barbarian, kero?"

"Right now yeah, because they haven't found anyone as amazing at the job as me. I bet you'd make an amazing barbarian though!"

Mina realized what she said as soon as the words slipped out of her lips and she felt her face burn. She opened her mouth to speak; but Tsuyu cut her off with a soft laugh. "I don't think I would. Those moves seemed like they'd be way too much for me."

Mina was surprised by her answer, but returned her smile with one of her own. "It's not too hard once you get the right form down! But don't let the others know or they might try to one up me, got it?"

"I won't don't worry. So I just have to get in good form right, like this?" She mimicked the form Mina had been practicing earlier. Honestly? She did a pretty good job at copying it. But...

"Bend your knee a little more, like this." Mina gently pushed her leg into position before taking her arms into her hands. "You want to put all your energy into your hit! Make them regret messing with you!!"

"That doesn't sound like something a teacher would recommend, kero."

"Eh, what do they know; have they fought a dragon!? I didn't think so."

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That night was the start of their training sessions together. Tsuyu had been right, being a barbarian hadn't been in the cards for her.

She made an amazing warrior though, clicking into their party as easily as a puzzle piece. And she worked together with Mina just as well, fluidly working within her fighting style on the field. And hey, if she occasionally used barbarian moves or Mina used warrior moves, who would notice?





A FROZEN HEART

BY SHADOWWOLVEN

"I wouldn't resist if I were you."

His words were as cold and sharp as the steel blade in his hand, which was pointed down at the neck of an older male. There was no hesitation to be detected within those grey and blue heterochromatic eyes, the wisps of his white and red hair framing his boyish but elegant face in a way that was reminiscent of a beautiful portrait. The only betrayal to his royal appearance was the disgusted scowl plastered on his face.

The sorcerer was pinned, hands sealed in a thick layer of ice to the ground, with little other way to escape lest he wanted to walk away without a head. He chuckled through ragged breaths, a sardonic smirk spread across his face. "Well now, if it ain't the prince himself!" he drawled. "Heard ya ran from the palace some time ago, but imagine my surprise to see ya here fightin' against lowly criminals like meself!"

Shouto narrowed his eyes. "Silence, old geezer, unless you want to cut yourself on my blade."

The man grinned, unfazed. "But that won't do, yer highness! If ya lop off my head... Well then, wouldn't that make ya a murderer? What would yer father think?"

A dangerous glint flickered in his eyes. His grip around the hilt tightened, movement so quick he nearly pierced his neck. "Don't you *dare* talk about that man in front of me," he spit.

The sorcerer gulped as he felt the blade press against him, one hair's breadth from splitting open his skin. Still, he continued to wear his cocky grin. "Ya really do resemble your father in more ways than one."

"What did I *just* say?" A chill froze the room, silence deafening the small space. Shouto glared at the man beneath his blade, who was at his simple mercy, yet felt nothing but icy contempt and a seething, boiling rage. His fingers trembled, knuckles stark white. "I am *nothing* like that man...!"

A line of dark blue frost crackled out from beneath his fingertips, darting down the length of steel like a serpent lashing out to strike its prey. It would've pierced its cold fangs into the helpless man were it not for a bright voice breaking his concentration.

"Todoroki! We finished capturing everyone over here! How are things over there?"

The jagged line of magic froze near the tip of his blade. Shouto blinked. A dim light returned to his dull eyes and he shouted back, "I got him."

Within moments, a group of young adventurers filtered into the room. Leading the front was the novice Izuku, followed by the witch Ochako, the knight Iida, and finally the barbarian Katsuki.

The blond was the first to scoff at the sight in front of them. "Your ice magic not enough to restrain him, Half 'n Half?"

"He's secure. Does it really matter how I do it?"

Izuku stepped forward, rope in hand. "You can move your sword now, Todoroki. He already passed out."

Shouto glanced back down at the annoying man and noticed, indeed, he had lost consciousness. His eyes were rolled back in his head, mouth partially agape, skin pale as a sheet. Thankfully, he was still breathing and the shallow cut on his neck was inconsequential.

Sheathing his weapon, he quickly pushed his way through the line of comrades and out of the abandoned building. He continued in the direction of the Froggy Tavern alone, while quietly whispering, "I'm not like him. I'm not like him. I'm not..."

... + + +

The red sun drifted below the horizon, leaving the air calm and warm for a typical summer evening. Izuku's party seated themselves at the large dining hall, chatting the time away over dinner. It wasn't long before they ate their fill and retired to their rooms to prepare for yet another exciting adventure. Shouto lay in his own room, tossing and turning atop his futon as exhaustion took hold.

His eyes opened to find himself standing in an all-too-familiar throne room. In the distance, seated atop an extravagant, lonesome throne, was his father. A condescending glower creased every corner of his face, his disapproving and disgusted scowl intensified by the flickering shadows cast by the bright orange flames atop his staff.

"You're an ungrateful *fool*. I never raised you to act like this! How much longer do you insist on squandering away your untapped potential for some stupid folly such as 'freedom' and 'adventure'?" He scoffed. "You're sounding like your foolish dreamer of a mother."

Shouto clenched his jaw, fists tight. "I told you already. I'll reject you. That *includes* your magic."

His father sighed, exasperated. "But you're special, Shouto! Born with the natural ability to wield magic of two polar opposite elements at once—a power no one thought was possible—and yet you refuse this gift I have bestowed upon you?!"

"I have nothing more to say to you, old man," Shouto growled out through grit teeth, turning on his heels.

"Your mother's magic will consume you," Enji roared from behind. "There will come a time when you *need* my magic. Otherwise..."

Shouto slammed the grand doors shut, silencing his father's persistent howls. "Shut up already," he hissed, making his way to the stables. His faithful steed nuzzled into his open hand, and he habitually ran his fingers through its white mane. The calming sensation of combing through silky strands quickly faded away to the seething anger that blinded his senses, words of boiling hatred spewing under his breath. "I won't be your pawn anymore. I don't need your stupid magic and your stupid teachings... *Never!*"

"So you're going to abandon me here as well, Shouto?"

His blood ran cold. He whipped around, frantically scanning the stables for the origin of that familiar voice. A flicker of white in the distance caught his gaze, and his eyes widened at the sight of his mother gazing down at him from a tower. Though far, her chilling voice rang out as clear as ice.

"You truly are your father's son," she said.

"N-no, I'm going to save you! Just..." He hesitated, only silently pleading toward her. *Just not right now. I don't have the strength yet!*

"I see..." she mumbled. As she turned her back, the open window began to burn up in brilliant shades of orange and red. She glanced back over her shoulder, staring out through the living bars of inferno.

Hidden within the flecks of flame, Shouto could make out her disgusted face—the same look she wore the night she snapped and took hold of a boiling kettle: broken, traumatized, distant, fearful. Before he knew it, he dropped hold of the reins and ran toward her.

I want to save you. I want to show you I'm not my father. Please, believe me... Mom!

But no matter how much he ran, the tower maintained its impossible distance. The flames engulfed the entirety of the open window, sealing her to a lonesome, fiery isolation. Shouto screamed out in frustration at his uselessness, slumping down to the ground, lungs burning. The earth shook beneath his weight, and before he could react, he found himself slipping down into a pitch-black abyss.

+ + +

Shouto shot up in a cold sweat, fingers tightly wound around the partially kicked-off blankets. He took a second to steady his thundering heartbeats before glancing out the open window, peering wordlessly at the quiet summer evening.

It was that nightmare again. How many months had it been since he first left the palace and traveled with Midoriya's group? How many nights had these cursed visions haunted his mind, deprived him of peace and rest? Worst of all, it felt like it was becoming more frequent and more vivid with every subsequent visit.

His heavy eyelids and weary limbs urged him to fall back asleep. However, his thoughts wouldn't stop racing, a wary feeling warning him he'd go crazy if he kept sitting in complete silence in this room. With a loud sigh, he pulled himself off the futon and quietly exited the tavern for a breath of fresh air.

The night was warm, but he felt colder than ever before. Every exhale through his clenched teeth were shallow white puffs that the summer breeze quickly swept away. He continued to shiver, his hands clammy and ice-cold. In his sleep-deprived delirium, he chalked it up as signs of a bad fever—maybe even a bad flu. After all, his chest stung if he tried taking deep breaths, and a migraine made its home on the left-side of his head.

He paused beneath a large oak to catch his breath when he noticed a strange, tingling sensation at the fingertips of his left hand. It wasn't long before he couldn't feel the rough bark, completely numb to the friction.

"What the hell?"

As he studied his arm in confusion, a flash of searing white pain suddenly shot up the length of his arm. He let out a pained groan, collapsing to the ground while clutching his head as the burning pain melded with his pulsating migraine.

Gritting through the pain, he willed his eyes to wince back open. What he saw was a layer of vibrant flames flickering across his entire left arm, seeking to consume him. He flinched back and tried to focus his mind on the magic that seemingly started up all on its own. However, he couldn't grasp hold of the element that once felt so natural to wield.

A deep, maniacal laughter through the sound of crackling flames finally severed any attempts at reining in his spiraling magic. Eyes wide and bloodshot, he watched in horror as he made out the silhouette of his father's distorted, grinning face dancing in the blending hues of reds and oranges.

“No...” Shouto whispered. “Get out, get out, get out!” he screamed. In a panic, he clutched his own arm with the other and summoned forth a thick layer of ice. Within seconds, the wild flames that once coated his skin and clothes like a living sleeve were extinguished into pitch-black ice, jagged and untamed.

He slumped back onto the ground, panting heavily. One side felt numb, his mind running into frenzied blanks. He felt himself shuddering, unable to hear the broken hollow laughter that left his throat.

“That’s right... that’s right!” he cackled, clutching at his white hair as he gaze wild-eyed into the sky. “If I just get rid of the flames... if I get rid of him, then I can be free... Free!”

+ + +

The sun rose from its slumber to a frigid dawn. A light layer of snow blanketed every surface, from atop roofs of shacks to the bright green foliage of nature. Everyone awoke with shivers and chattering teeth, bundling themselves up tighter as they stared drowsily out at the winter scenery. It wasn’t long before they all realized there was something horribly wrong and scrambled downstairs.

“I didn’t find Todoroki in his room,” Iida remarked, brows furrowed in worry.

“And I couldn’t find him anywhere outside,” Ochako chimed in from atop her staff before releasing her levitating magic.

Izuku placed his fingers beneath his chin and began to mumble. “That’s strange... Todoroki is missing. Winter began two months too early, and last I knew...”

“Ribbit, I think I know where he is,” said innkeeper Tsuyu. She pointed out one of the windows. “There’s a tower over there, which I don’t think was there before.”

Sure enough, a tower in the distance glistened in its entirety, reflecting the sunlight’s rays in a brilliant white that contrasted with the dark ice of its walls. Emerging from its direction were numerous silhouettes, a slow, trickling stream of monsters.

Izuku nodded. “That’s got to be where Todoroki is. Let’s go.”

With that, they quickly gathered their supplies and took off. They figured the quickest route was maneuvering past the slow horde of monsters by hiding in the snow-laden terrain. As they snuck by, they noticed that all the dangerous beasts had chunks of black frost lodged deep in their backs and limbs, their eyes glazed over with a zombified stare. Despite a few surprise skirmishes here and there, they finally made it to the base of the tower within just a little over an hour.

There was a simple opening for a door, and as they stepped inside the structure, a deep chill shook their cores that even the snow-covered landscape outside couldn't achieve. Luckily, they found no monsters or traps to hinder them and they climbed up the spiral staircase of the barren tower. The slick ice made it difficult, but with magic and the help of their snow-climbing gear, they made it to the top floor where a familiar figure stood still in the center, gazing out at the world beyond.

"Todoroki...?" Izuku asked. "Is that you?"

For a moment, he was still like a statue. Shouto then slowly turned over his left shoulder. What Izuku and the rest were greeted with was a demonic-looking armor of thick, black frost covering one side of his body, jagged like wild flames frozen in time. His eye glowed an unnatural golden color as he shot them a cold and sharp glare.

"What are you doing here? Get lost if you know what's good for yourselves."

"Hah?! What the hell is wrong with you all of a sudden, Half 'n Half?" Katsuki growled, stomping forward a few steps. "You've always been a huge pain in the ass, but somehow you're even more of a pain today. What's up with that edgy get-up anyway?! You finally showing us your true colors?"

Shouto scoffed, white hot breath escaping his lips. "None of you would understand..."

"Why, you—!"

Katsuki was going to take another step forward when Izuku tugged him lightly backward. His emerald-green eyes pleaded to take over, which Katsuki relented with a reluctant snarl. Izuku smiled and stepped forward.

"Todoroki, please, tell us what's wrong. We came here for you. Let us help you through this."

Shouto coldly glanced back, face stoic. "A few months of camaraderie is nothing compared to what my mother and I suffered through. For years, that man—my *detestable* father—has treated us like nothing but his pawns of power. My mother was tossed aside once she had me, once he had broken her down until she felt nothing but resentment at the mere sight of *me*." He stared down at his left hand, now sharp-clawed, frosted, and numbed. "I was forced to learn my father's magic, his techniques, his abilities. I want *nothing* to do with him any longer."

He glared back at his former comrades. "I'm going to make an army and overthrow my father to bring about a new era. You can join my cause, but if you're just here to get in my way, then I suggest you get out of my sight."

The group was silent for a second. "We're not going anywhere, Todoroki," Izuku said. "Instead..."

"We're going to save you!" everyone but Katsuki shouted in close unison.

"Then, I have no choice... I won't hold back." With a wave of his arm, a flurry of sharp icicles darted toward them at lightning speed.

Uraraka teleported herself and Iida to the opposite side. Katsuki fearlessly swung his heated sword down with a cocky grin, shattering the shards in his way. Izuku leapt out of harm, ducking behind a pillar.

They struck back in unison, but their attacks were met by a strong barrier of protective ice. The outer layer shattered upon impact dangerous projectiles, scraping and cutting through their armor and skin with painful bites. Shoto morphed the terrain with jutting walls, uneven ground, and deadly snares. This was his domain, made of his own magic and his own twisted desires.

Izuku knew they had to end things quickly. They were already down Ochako and Iida. Katsuki quickly glanced at Izuku, then redirected his attention to the emotionless figure still standing in the center. He roared, drawing his attention as he struck down with his blade.

"You know that doesn't work, right?" Shoto said apathetically, thrusting his clawed hand forward. A thick wall of ice pushed Katsuki aside, crashing him through a pillar and into the wall like a ragdoll. He coughed out in pain, struggling to stand.

Izuku seized this chance, sneaking from behind before swinging his blade with all his might. Shoto's magic instinctively protected him, but not before he managed to wedge his sword deep into the barrier.

"Why do you all persist so much?" Shoto glared, throwing Izuku back as well..

Izuku wheezed, but his eyes were unwavering with determination. "It's because... you're our friend, Todoroki!"

Shoto flinched, wrinkling his nose. "Are you naive?"

Katsuki sent a fireball in Shoto's direction. A partially-melted dent formed in it that was noticeably slower to recover due to Izuku's stuck blade.

"It's true. I don't know what you're going through. I've never grown up in an environment like yours, but..." Izuku mumbled, standing up with a sway. "But that's all the more reason why I need to step in! You're *you* after all! It's your power, not his!" Izuku charged toward him again, this time with only his fist. Shouto was caught by surprise.

"Wha—?!"

He punched through the weakened barrier, fist colliding with stomach. The air left his lungs, fracturing his protective black frost. Small pieces began to crumble and fall. As he fell back, Izuku's words ignited a wave of nostalgic memories, like he's heard this advice from someone else before...

The legendary hero, All Might, flickered to mind. He remembered meeting him at the palace, listening to his wise words of advice with his smiling mother by his side. That day he vowed to become a great prince, one who went on many adventures, learned many lessons, and who would one day become a more kind ruler than his father.

"So, this is..."

"Quit being such a baby and make your powers your own already, damnit!" Katsuki's voice rang out, his fist colliding with the cracked ice, shattering it completely.

Shouto blacked out. The next thing he remembered was waking up in the tavern, his comrades seated nearby. They took notice of his recovery and flocked over with worried smiles, save for Katsuki who continued to stand by the entrance.

"I'm sorry for pulling you all into my mess," Shouto said weakly, giving them all an awkward smile. "But my head finally feels clear again. And I... I'm actually looking forward to making this power," he raised his hands into the air, "my own someday. After all, like you said, it's not his, but mine..."

From one palm came flecks of sparkling white snow, and the other a small, steady orange flame.

"But will you remain by my side, despite all I did?"

Izuku smiled. "Of course, Todoroki! I said it before, and I'll say it again: we're all friends here!"

Katsuki scoffed and rolled his eyes, stepping out, while Ochako and Iida nodded in agreement with Izuku.

Shouto sighed in relief and smiled a genuine, happy smile for the first time in recent memory. His chest felt fuzzy and warm, and for once he heard the beats of excitement thumping in his ears. "Thank you," he said, glancing back down at either of his hands.

I think I finally found the strength to free you, Mom.





UNEXPECTED RESCUE

BY EMBERCELICA

Midoriya has always wanted to fly.

Being on the ground his whole life, he'd watch the birds soar overhead, graceful and effortless. Each beat of their wings carried them into the horizon, past the plains and valleys of his hometown. He'd climb trees to watch them as far as he could, and the scars and bruises from falling just made him more bold.

Flying has not been of the top priorities on Midoriya's mind recently. But with the stars flying past him now, the night air whispering in his ear and combing through his hair, he can't help but remember that longing.

Midoriya has to turn around to look past the body of the...beast he's riding on to see the ground. Even with the stars, the mushroom forest below them is glowing, illuminating the night with a faint shine. His gaze always returns to the sky, though, clearer and darker and shining brighter than he's ever seen it. He watches the stars blink and disappear as they fly.

"Don't lean back so much."

The voice cuts through the night, snapping him back to reality. It's low, a little gravelly, and clear to Midoriya's ears, the source being the boy in front of him, the one that's guiding the beast both of them are riding on. The wind is starting to blow against his eyes, so Midoriya presses his head down on the boy's back, resting on his cloak with a sigh. The boy doesn't seem to notice, but Midoriya can't be sure. The boy seems like he'd disappear into the night if Midoriya let go of him.

Turning his head, it feels like the first time he's ever seen the night sky so clearly. It's an overwhelming darkness so bright with stars it hurts his eyes. It's so glorious. It's so quiet.

Every so often, the wings of the bat (*bat*, yes, he's riding a bat right now, according to the structure of the wings and the fur) will enter his view, obscuring the night sky with absolute darkness. it's the largest thing he's ever ridden on, but not the largest beast he's ever seen. Midoriya thinks it could swallow the night whole.

The wind sings around the beat of the bat's wings, which are like drum beats, shaking his chest like a giant's footfall. It makes Midoriya nervous, but the boy in front of him seems right at home.

"Amazing," he mutters.

"Have you ever flown before?"

Midoriya leans back to stare at the wild mass of purple hair in front of him. It's hard to make out the color in the moonlight, but Midoriya squints, trying to pick the boy apart from the night sky. "Never."

"Well, this is a crazy first time, isn't it."

"I'd say." There's a slight dip that makes Midoriya's heart jump. His arms tighten around the boy's chest instinctively as he buries his face into the nape of his neck. "Sorry..."

The boy turns his head to peer at him. From here, Midoriya notes his gleaming eye, the pointed tip of his ear. "Are you scared?" he asks.

Midoriya can't help but stare. It's hard to read his expression, especially in the faint moonlight, but there's something wary in his tone. The question is poised out of genuine curiosity, though, not because he wants Midoriya to be scared.

"No," he answers. The words feel like they're stolen from his mouth, flying out into the night sky. "Not at all. You saved me."

The boy turns away, and Midoriya almost misses that impassive gaze. "You've stopped bleeding." There's a bit of stiffness in his voice.

Midoriya touches his head and pulls away some dark flakes. The wind takes it away from him. "Oh." There's a lean as the bat turns slightly, and Midoriya finds himself holding on, clinging to the boy.

"Easy, easy," the boy says, and Midoriya almost apologizes before he realizes that it's addressed to the bat, not him. He can't hear if the creature responds, if it could even speak back. Instead, he looks at the boy's hair, blown back, and how it seems to absorb the moonlight.

Despite the darkness, and even with the light from the forest below them, the boy has no issue navigating through the night. He's at home here, Midoriya thinks. Or maybe he has night vision. He lets out a shuddering breath. As the adrenaline seeps away, he finds himself leaning forward, resting his head on the back of his savior's neck. His arms feel sore now, after being tied up for so long. Everything aches...

It might be the blood loss, but he thinks the boy leans back on him.

"Get some rest," he says. "You're safe now."

Maybe there's something soothing about the dark, Midoriya thinks.

The first thing Midoriya registers as he stirs awake is rain.

The soft pattering against glass as he shuts his eyes tight. How it rattles against the rooftop, sliding down the sides and off the edges, landing in fat puddles he used to jump into as a kid. Midoriya burrows further into the warm sheets of his bed. It's a nice day to sleep in. His mother will like the rain; it'll help her garden.

Midoriya shifts around, and he feels a pressure on his chest, something kneading on it. He smiles, thinking of the inn cats he's met on his adventures. There were times he'd been woken up by a cat deciding to use him as a bed, though they tend to cling to Todoroki more often than not, which perplexed the ex-prince. Uraraka loves the animals they'd meet on their journey, whether as small as a mouse or as large as a horse, while Iida seemed nervous around any animals. Just the thought of his friends makes Midoriya smile, involuntarily.

I miss them. He blinks slowly, staring up at the flat ceiling. The lullaby of the rain convinces him to close his eyes again, and he curls up in his bed. *I'll have to tell mom about them when I get up.*

Then Midoriya remembers he hasn't slept in his own bed for three months.

He rockets up, launching the cat off. It yowls in anger, darting across the room and leaving Midoriya confused and with the ache of claws in his chest. There's an immediate searing pain that flashes across his body, and he's grabbing his right shoulder, curling into himself. After a couple deep breaths, he unfurls, sitting back with a wince.

Turning his head, Midoriya spies deep brown trees and lush foliage through a window, as well as the silhouettes of pixies as they flit past, dodging the rain. A soft green hue washes over the room, like the rain has infused everything. It's the only source of light coming in, and Midoriya has to squint to look around. As his eyes adjust to the darkness, he makes out the table in the corner, where golden eyes, feline and angry, watch him.

Alright. A quick survey of his surroundings tell him two things:

1. This is not Saitama, where he last remembers being with his friends, and
2. He's alone.

He's been stripped of his gloves and his vest, leaving only his cotton white shirt, which has seen better days. The bed he's laying on is his bedroll, placed in the corner of this little room. His bag is nearby, against the wall. When he grazes his fingers against the side of his temple, a sharp pain emerges like a slash, and he closes his eyes again. The last thing he remembers—

The bandit holds a blade against his throat. Midoriya gulps, feeling the edge of it start to cut into his skin. He can't tell if this bandit is the same one holding his head up by his hair, or the one stepping on his leg.

"If you can't tell us where the prince is, then you're useless to us," the man hisses. "There's no bounty on your head."

Midoriya flinches, but he wills his lips not to quiver. His dagger is stuck in the dirt in front of him, but he can't reach it. Something drips down his face. In his fading vision, he can see the circle of bandits close on him.

"Let him go," rings a voice from the darkness.

"Who is—"

*The voice echoes out, and the bodies around him stiffen. "I said, **let him go.**"*

He stands on shaky feet like tree roots trying to cling to broken dirt, and his shoulder almost screams as he slides his bag over it, one-sided. There's no telling when whoever brought him here will be back. He's able to walk, at least, and as he approaches the door, he hears a thud behind him that signals that the cat's dropped down from the table.

He swings the door open and comes face to face with a stranger.

"Ow!"

Midoriya reels back from the punch he's thrown, as lopsided and off as it is by using his non-dominant hand. The stranger blocks it anyway, and Midoriya's body seizes for a second from the movement, just pure pain racing across his body. He takes a step back. "Sorry!" is the first thing that comes out of his mouth, but in the chaos, there's something underneath his feet that he stumbles over, and now he's falling backwards, losing all sense of balance—

He doesn't hit the ground.

Midoriya slowly opens his eyes, one at a time. The stranger, purple-haired and angry-eyed, is clutching Midoriya's arm. His other arm is still hidden under his cloak, but he doesn't look happy.

Midoriya gulps.

"Toyo!" The boy hisses, turning his head. "Toyo!" After a few moments, he sighs. "Alright, be outside if you want. But if you cry about rain in your fur, know that I warned you."

The boy says nothing to him, and Midoriya finds that impassive gaze focused on him as he's pulled to his feet again. There's a moment of silence before he steps aside, the open doorway in front of Midoriya.

The offer is clear, but there's something akin to concern in the boy's eyes, just a flicker of it when he looks at Midoriya's shoulder with a gentle crease of his eyebrows.

Midoriya steps back into the room, clutching his shoulder tighter. The pain's relocated itself from his head to just about everywhere else on his body. He stares out the doorway, where the rain still mutters and whispers. "Your cat. She ran out. Should I...get her inside?"

The boy quirks a brow at him. His hood has fallen back, and Midoriya notes the wild mass of purple hair matted down by rain. The bottom half of his face is covered by the scarf around his neck, stark white against his dark purple cloak. He can't see his mouth, but Midoriya can't imagine he's smiling right now.

In the silence, Midoriya's need to fill it comes out again. "This? Oh, I'm— fine, I've had worse. I wanna— thank you for housing me, I'm not sure what trouble you went through—"

"You shouldn't strain your injuries."

"Huh?"

The boy gestures to Midoriya's corner. "Sit down."

Midoriya finds himself kneeling on his bedroll. He blinks a couple of times. "How are you doing that?"

The dark shadows hanging under the boy's eyes don't seem impressed as he kneels down in front of Midoriya. "Doing what?" he asks, pushing his cloak aside.

"Ordering me around. I remember that— from— " he breaks off, and the boy stares into his eyes, purple and unwavering, waiting.

Eventually, the boy breaks eye contact first. "Don't think so much," he says, in a tone layered in concern and aloofness, maybe. He can't really get a sense of the proportions.

Carefully, the boy unloads the items he was carrying under his cloak, cradled in his arm. Small glass jars of unusual, mismatched shapes, along with rolls of bandages placed carefully on the floor. Midoriya gets the hint and moves to unbutton his shirt, letting the white fabric slide off his shoulders. He grimaces at the purpling across his stomach, the shallow cuts and scrapes that overlap with the older scars.

The boy gets to work on him, uncorking the top of one jar and dipping his fingers in. He doesn't blink twice at Midoriya's injuries, only waits for a confirming nod from Midoriya before applying to the worst cuts. The salve is cold, but his fingers are gentle over his abdomen. Midoriya has to restrain his instincts to seize up at the sensation, and he tries to calm himself by watching the slow motions of the other boy's hands. His face grows more unreadable as he focuses, at least as far as Midoriya can tell. The bottom half of his face is still obscured by his scarf.

There's a gentleness to his actions, to how the boy adjusts his pressure when Midoriya can't help but wince. As time passes, Midoriya studies the vibrant color of his hair, how it almost blends in yet glows in the dim lighting of the room, and how the light from the window strikes it almost like moonlight. In a situation like this, Midoriya offers the only thing he has. "My name is Midoriya."

The boy doesn't meet his gaze, even as he wraps the worst cut with bandage, slow and precise and tight. "Shinsou." It's a clipped response. He hands one of the jars to Midoriya and crosses his legs. "How'd you get mixed up with bounty hunters?"

Midoriya sighs, rubbing his shoulder with the salve and feeling that pain fade away to numbness. It's closer to better than he's felt all day. "It's, uh, a long story. And I'm not the best at telling them."

Shinsou only tilts his head, pulling one leg out to hold against his chest. "I'll tell you when to stop if I get bored," he replies, but instead of ice in his voice, it's like a gentle push, like a challenge. Midoriya's mouth twitches, just a bit, into a smile.

+ + +

Shinsou doesn't tell him to stop. It's nice how he doesn't mind Midoriya's tangents, or how he backtracks to explain some off-hand comment, or even how Midoriya trips up to cover up Todoroki's identity, for the sake of safety. He watches Midoriya with that flat gaze that seems just a touch more relaxed.

In fact, he seems enraptured with the bandit story Midoriya recounts, and that that open gaze has Midoriya rehashing other stories from his adventures, starting with his first meeting with Uraraka and Iida. Shinsou leans forward as Midoriya talks, and Midoriya quickly learns to read his body language instead of his hidden face.

Midoriya's halfway through a sentence and trying to figure out on the fly how to describe Todoroki's situation when the door creaks open. Toyo darts in, stopping in the middle of the room, tail swishing, before her yellow eyes meet Midoriya's.

The two of them are quiet, watching as the white cat sidles up to Midoriya. Her ears are oversized, Midoriya notes, and her nose is pushed back and upwards in a look that seems less feline and more—

All thoughts instantly fall away the second Toyo drops a dead pixie into his lap.

"Oh gods!" The pixie, small-bodied and humanoid, blinks awake. "OH GODS!"

His first instinct is to panic, hands reaching towards the pixie and then away, because he doesn't want to *touch* it or *hurt* it or—he settles on muffled screaming, instead.

Toyo looks quite disappointed as he lets the dazed pixie fly off on its own. Eventually, Midoriya calms down enough to notice another surprise:

Shinsou is laughing. It's a pretty, low sound, sort of harsh and sort of vibrant, but what catches Midoriya's attention the most is the glint of fangs above his scarf.

"Your teeth!" He can't stop his marveling, even as Shinsou tenses up, that laughter cutting out. "I've never met a vampire before."

Shinsou's eyes are sharp, wary as he pulls up his scarf. His hand holds onto it like a barrier between them. Despite this, Midoriya's mouth runs off without him. "I— I mean no harm—wow, I have so many *questions*—" He turns and grabs for his bag. He searches through it quickly.

"What are you looking for?" Shinsou demands, his voice harsh and a little hysteric.

"I take notes on the people I meet, and—" Midoriya sighs with irritation when he finds his quill broken in two. " Ugh, and I'm out of ink— and— uh. Oh."

Shinsou is on his feet, having already stepped back from Midoriya. His eyes are uneasy, and his hand grips onto his scarf tight, like a mistake has been made. He looks like he might just disappear into the darkness of the room.

He looks terrified.

Midoriya pauses, lowering his quill. "I— I'm sorry if I scared you. I just...I was looking for my notebook."

Shinsou's eyes settle marginally. There's a rustle, and Shinsou's hand emerges from his cloak, holding out Midoriya's leatherbound journal.

Midoriya takes it back. "You read it?" As somber as the mood has gotten, he can't help but feel his ears turn red. He is *not* embarrassed by the idea of someone reading through his scribbled entries about the lands and people he's met, questions and thoughts and notes unfiltered with the belief that no one would care to read through any of it.

Shinsou keeps his distance, still standing, and his voice emerges slowly. "I was trying to figure out who you are," he admits. "How dangerous you might be."

"What do you think?"

Those eyes meet his, and Midoriya notes how they gleam, how they assess him, injured and shirtless and now healing. "You're a curious person," he states. "You've met so many people."

"I have!" Midoriya's enthusiasm jumps out again, and Shinsou's reaction is less fearful and more surprised. "But I've never met a vampire before! Could I ask some questions? Like— transformations!"

Shinsou stares at him, and Midoriya has a couple seconds to wonder if he should possibly tone it down when Shinsou releases his hold on his scarf. In a blink, he's gone, and a second blink, there's a bat on the floor.

Midoriya's heart leaps out of his chest. "Oh! You're so small! This is absolutely amazing," he babbles, as the bat hops across the floor towards him. He lowers his hand down, letting Shinsou climb on. "Are you still aware in this form? Can you understand me?" He doesn't even pause to wait for a reaction before continuing, raising Shinsou to eye level. "Your clothes must have transformed with you, since I don't see it lying here—but you're not wearing smaller clothes, so does it get absorbed in your transformation?"

Shinsou doesn't answer, but there's a look on his tiny furry face that says *I'm doing this entirely for your sake*. Midoriya can't resist using his other hand to squish those bat cheeks between his fingers, making him squeak. "This must be so useful! Imagine the possibilities!"

The change happens much too fast for Midoriya to follow. "You talk too much," Shinsou gripes, with a tone that could be considered teasing. The breath of his words against Midoriya's mouth makes Midoriya realize their proximity, and he can't look away. His hand is still holding Shinsou's face, his thumb now caressing the corner of his mouth, cool and soft. There are a couple seconds where neither of them moves, and Midoriya watches those eyes grow wide with realization.

It feels like an eternity before Toyo meows, breaking the spell. Shinsou pushes off his legs (when did his hands get on his legs? Transformation, Midoriya writes it off as) to slide back and Midoriya turns his head away. Midoriya knows his face is hot and blushing. Do vampires blush? He can't tell, because Shinsou is pulling his scarf up again and looking away.

"It—amazing," Midoriya breathes, and then immediately he's scrambling to clarify himself. "I mean—it must be amazing to fly, like that!"

"It's fine," Shinsou responds, his voice a bit more—not as stoic as before. Toyo climbs into his crossed legs, settling comfortably. "You're one to talk. Traveling all over the lands."

"And what about the giant bat from before? And your voice—you must have a thrall, then." Midoriya shakes his nerves off by flipping through his notebook, just feeling those pages between his fingers.

Toyo mewls as she swipes at Shinsou's fingers, who entertains her almost absentmindedly. "Yeah."

"That's so *cool*," Midoriya says in awe.

Shinsou's hand freezes for a second, during which Toyo gets a good swipe in. "Really?" There's something hoarse in Shinsou's voice as he looks at Midoriya.

"Of course. How many—" he cuts himself off. There's something sad about Shinsou's eyes, something that was absent in his dazzled expression during Midoriya's stories. There's something in his gut that connects this look and how he reacted when Midoriya noticed his fangs. "Is something wrong?"

That look isn't necessarily locked away, but Shinsou does avert his gaze again, looking down at Toyo. "Nothing is wrong. I'm not used to guests, is all."

Midoriya thinks for a couple seconds, watching Shinsou and his cat in the darkness of his cottage. He makes up his mind. "Come help me find my friends," he insists, leaning forward.

"What?"

"I need an escort back to Saitama. That's where I last saw them. Come with me to find them again." *And maybe you'll come and join us and we can keep being friends and I can ask you more questions when I have a new quill and ink.*

Shinsou's voice is ripe with confusion. "You don't even know me."

He shrugs. "I'm Midoriya. I want to see the world and help others, like how someone helped me a long time ago." He picks up his notebook again, holding it against his chest. "The people I've met along the way have proven to be that anyone can be a hero." He nods, placing his notebook down in front of him. "You're Shinsou. You're a vampire who saved me from people who were about to kill me, and then you went out of your way to heal me. You also have a pet cat, and she's cute."

Midoriya grins. "See? Now we've met. You're one of my heroes now." He watches the emotions flit across Shinsou's face, which has never seemed as open as it does now.

Eventually he answers. "Fine." His voice is warm. His smile is in full view, and as small as it is, it fills Midoriya's heart. "But you need to rest and get better now, first."

Midoriya lays back on his bedroll, satisfied. It's easier to rest now, content and safe in the company of a friend.





JIROU'S SONG

BY FRAPPI

The nights in the forest were always the same, quiet, with the insects and night owls chirping away. The fire crackled as more wood was added to keep it alive while the catch of the day cooked. A group of traveler's rested closeby with tents pitched for when they decided to retire.

"How much longer for the food, nerd?" Bakugou said with his hand behind his head as he stared at the stars.

"Shouldn't be more than a couple minutes," the 'nerd', Midoriya, replied. He stirred the pot hanging over the open fire.

There were several others waiting for the food as well: Kirishima, who was sitting next to Bakugo, Todoroki, a prince who stared at the fire, watching it crackle and shine bright, and his trusted knight Momo next to him. Along the other side of the fire was Kaminari, a thief who recently joined their quest.

"Whatever it is you're making, it smells good," Kaminari said as he strummed the lute in his hands, playing a gentle tune for the atmosphere.

"Just regular stew. It's hearty and my mother lives by it," Midoriya said as he tasted the stew. It was ready and he went to go grab bowls for everyone.

Before he was able to do that, a loud screech could be heard in the forest surrounding them. Everyone got up from where they were and grabbed their weapons, prepared to seek out what that was.

"What the hell was that?" Bakugou asked, taking his sword out of his sheath.

"No clue, but we need to split up to find out," Midoriya said. "Lord Todoroki, you can stick with me and we'll head this way. Bakugou, you and Kirishima can take to the skies and see if there's something out there."

"What about me and the thief?" Momo said sword in hand.

"You two can take the other route, see if the noise comes from there," Midoriya instructed. Momo and Kaminari both nodded and the group split apart. Kirishima shifted into a dragon and Bakugou climbed aboard, taking to the skies to see what it was.

Kaminari and Momo took to the left side of the forest, following a path they hadn't taken yet, but planned to take once daybreak. The fire from their fire pit dimmed as they got further away and the fireflies lit up the area for them. It was scenic and amazing, if it were under different circumstances.

“What do you think it was?” Kaminari asked Momo as he followed her lead. She sliced the vines in front of the path, careful not to cut her companion.

“Not a clue, but whatever it was, shouldn’t be too far—”

“AHHHHH!”

The sound of another scream interrupted Momo. This time it was louder and closer to the two of them.

“Come on we’re close,” Momo whispered as she snuck around a tree to see what was happening. Kaminari followed behind, pulling out a small sword in case of an attack.

Momo peeked around the corner to see that there was something splashing around near the shore. It looked like something was caught in a fishing net and couldn’t get out. Kaminari poked his head out from behind the tree and saw as well.

“No way...I thought they were just myths...” Kaminari whispered as he slowly crept his way to the net.

“What are you doing?” Momo questioned. Kaminari put his hand up for a minute to be quiet as he got closer to the frantic being. Momo looked around to see if they weren’t alone, but couldn’t tell. Kaminari bent down to the being in the net and nearly smiled. There was a real life mermaid in front of him, and a pretty one at that. Her short dark purple hair framed her face perfectly. The mermaid started thrashing about, trying to get away from Kaminari.

“Hey, it’s ok, I’m not gonna hurt you,” he said with his hands up. He looked down at her tail and saw that it was wrapped around the net pretty tight. He took out a small dagger and went to cut the net from her tail.

“I think we’re alone,” Momo said softly as she came over to see what was going on. She looked at the creature in the net and her jaw nearly dropped. “What...is she?”

“She’s a mermaid,” Kaminari said as he cut the net apart. Momo helped by pulling the ropes off of the mermaid so she could get free. After one last cut of the net, the mermaid was free and she was crawling back into the water to escape.

“No no wait! Come back!” Kaminari yelled back, but it was too late.

“Damnit, there goes the chance at getting a wish.”

“A wish?”

"Yeah. I guess it's more of a legend, but they say if you save a mermaid, or help a mermaid out, you get a wish from them," Kaminari quoted. He chuckled a little bit looking at the water.

"I guess it's not true then," Momo said softly as she got up from the ground. "Good news though, she's at least away from the nets now and won't get caught in another one," Momo said with a sigh.

"Maybe, but it would have been cool to..." Kaminari stopped talking as he looked out into the water and saw there were ripples coming close to them. Then suddenly, the dark haired girl raised her head above the water. Her eyes wandered between the two of them and she looked scared, but yet she wanted to say something.

"*T- Tapadh leat,*" the mermaid said to them with a slight growl in her voice. They looked at her confused, not knowing what she said to them.

"I'm sorry, we don't understand," he said, explaining with his hands and looking apologetic. She bit her finger, thinking of a way to let them know what she said. There was only one way that she could get them to understand her. She carefully came up to the surface, still unsure about if there were anymore traps though.

"Whoa," Momo gasped in awe as she saw how beautiful her tail was. It was a mix of blues and purples and her scales came up to cover her chest. She came up to Kaminari and got close to his face, making him back up a little.

"A-As much as I would like to kiss you, ahem, that's going a bit too far," Kaminari said with his hands up. The mermaid tilted her head in confusion as she got closer. She moved closer to him and her hand brushed over the skin of his neck. His throat lit up with a bright purple light and then it trailed out of his throat and into hers.

"*I said...thank you,*" Her voice cracked as she spoke. Kaminari jumped a little in the air.

"How'd you do that?" Momo asked as she sat by the water.

"*I have...an ability to learn languages through touch,*" the mermaid said as best she could. She cleared her throat. "My name is Jirou"

"That's a beautiful name," Momo said with a smile. "My name is Momo Yaoyorozu, and this is my companion, Denki Kaminari." She held out her hand for Jirou to shake, but she looked at it with confusion. She took Momo's hand and looked around at it.

"Are you...offering me something?" Jirou asked. Kaminari chuckled at the notion.

"No, she's holding her hand out to shake it. It's a form of greeting," Kaminari said.

He held his hand out to Momo and they both showed her what a handshake was. A smile came across her face as the hands presented themselves to Jirou. She happily shook their hands and while it was a bit rough, it was pleasant.

"I wanted to thank you for saving me. I got caught in the net somehow and if you hadn't come by, I don't know what would have happened," Jirou said. Her tail swished around in the water, making ripples appear.

"You're welcome," both Momo and Kaminari said together. The three of them smiled at each other, happy that the mermaid was freed now. Suddenly, a branch snapped in the distance and everyone turned to the noise. Jirou felt a chill up her spine and went to dive back into the water. Before she dove completely, she grabbed Momo and Kaminari and dragged them below the water with her.

Momo started freaking out against the current, not knowing what Jirou had planned to do. Jirou pulled them along the current until they got to the other side of the river. It was almost instant just how fast they had gotten there.

Kaminari pulled his head above the water and took a deep breath. Momo did the same as Jirou emerged with them.

"What was that for?" Kaminari asked after catching his breath. He looked over at the river where they originally were and saw a group of men with fish hooks and swords. They didn't look friendly at all, but more pissed off that their net was cut.

"Those were the men who set the net," Jirou said. Momo and Kaminari looked at each other and sighed heavily.

"Thank you, but we could have handled them, Jirou," Momo said as she got out of the water and showed the golden symbol of the royal guards, one of many that were given to the guards for the Todoroki family. Jirou looked at the gold for a second and was mesmerized by the way it sparkled. Momo put it back and pulled Kaminari out of the water.

"I didn't want you guys to get hurt like I did," Jirou said as she stayed in the water. "Besides, I want to show you guys something." She waved her hand above the water and a small whirlpool appeared. Just as it was starting to spin, a cave appeared on the inside of the whirlpool.

"Whoa! What is this?" Kaminari asked, looking closely at the cave. It looked dark and most of it was covered in crystal clear water with the moon shining on the water.

"It's my grotto," Jirou said as she dove into the whirlpool and into the clear water below. Momo and Kaminari looked at each other and then at Jirou as she emerged and jumped into the whirlpool before it closed.

As the two of them swam to the surface, they could see that the grotto was a lot better than from just the whirlpool. Glowing crystals lined the walls and the places that weren't covered in water looked smooth and glossy. They got out of the water again and looked around for Jirou. The sound of a harp and a harmonious voice echoed through the cave.

My heart is pierced by Cupid

I disdain all glittering gold

There is nothing can console me

But my jolly sailor bold

The sound echoed throughout the cave, as if there were five of her singing at once. It mesmerized the two companions as they walked towards the noise. They saw her playing a small harp, fingers brushing against the strings gently.

"That's beautiful," Kaminari said as he came closer to Jirou. She looked up at him and smiled.

"Thank you. I love playing this instrument," she said softly. She continued to play as the two companions went to sit down close to her. They listened to her angelic voice echoing through the cave until she stopped.

"So this is your grotto then. What exactly is a grotto?" Momo asked as soon as Jirou finished.

"Well a grotto is kind of like an underground cave, but to us, it is a birthplace of mermaids." Jirou said. "We aren't born naturally as mermaids though. We are created."

"Created?" Momo asked

"Yeah. Whenever someone saves a mermaid, or a mermaid wants to save a life they are given the chance to become one. I was 7 when I saved a mermaid. She granted me the chance to become one and I took it."

Kaminari looked around the cave and thought for a second before turning back to Jirou. Something she said made him question something.

"So wait, we're here because we saved you, and you want to ask us to become one as well?" Kaminari asked her. He sounded panicked, like he didn't know if he wanted to go through with it.

"I was, yes but I actually wanted to ask you guys something else," Jirou said. Her tail splashed lightly against the surface of the water and the fins flailed a bit. "Would you mind if I joined you guys on your adventure?"

This surprised the two of them. They were on an adventure, yes, but nobody was to know about it. It was a top secret mission to find a lost sword that gave the user incredible powers and abilities. They thought it was supposed to be a secret, unless it clearly wasn't from the start.

"Adventure?" Kaminari asked suspiciously

"Yeah, you two are traveling together to different lands right?" Jirou asked, pointing to the clothes they were wearing. It was suitable clothing for traveling and protecting one another.

"We are, but it's not just us who's traveling. We have a group and we actually need to get back to them too," Momo said as she remembered the whole reason as to why they were out in the woods together. Jirou looked at them with an excited expression and clapped her hands.

"Maybe if we talk to them, they can allow me to come as well," Jirou suggested.

Momo looked over at Kaminari, who shrugged at her. She moved her head to the side and pulled him away to talk to him for a second.

"Would they be willing to have another traveler join us?" Momo asked.

"I mean Bakugou might be a bit off put, but I think the rest would be alright with it. I'm just more concerned with how she's gonna travel," Kaminari said. As if on cue, the sound of splashing water alerted them to turn towards Jirou. Instead of seeing her tail in the water, they saw her standing there in clothes, and on her legs too. They looked at her surprised and stunned, giving it a bit of thought now.

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The group had come back to the campsite and started eating the dinner Midoriya had made previously. Todoroki kept looking in the direction from where Momo and Kaminari had ventured off to. He turned his attention away for a second and then heard a branch snap. The others heard it too and prepared to attack whatever was coming for them.

"Hey guys! You made it back!" Kaminari said with his cheery voice. The group backed down and went back to eating, except for Bakugou. He could tell that there was something wrong and when he saw Momo appear with another girl by her side, he stood up with a sword in his hand.

"Who's this?" Bakugou asked, pointing his sword at Jirou. She held her hands up as Kirishima came over to help defuse the situation.

"Bakugou, calm down. This is our new friend Jirou," Momo said as she introduced her. The others got up and joined them, to see what the fuss was about.

"Hello everyone," Jirou said shyly as she held out a hand for them to shake. Surprisingly, Midoriya was the first to shake her hand, followed by Todoroki and then Kirishima. Bakugou huffed and made no move to shake her hand.

"How did you guys meet?" Todoroki asked Momo.

"That scream you heard was her. She got caught in a net and was struggling to get out," Momo said. She made no attempt to tell the others about what Jirou really was. That was up to her to tell if she wanted.

"What kind of net? I looked from the skies and saw no land nets," Bakugo said with a scowl.

"It was a fish trapping net." Jirou said. She explained to them the story about how she got caught and how both Momo and Kaminari saved her from the net. She also explained about the guys coming back, but didn't say much about the grotto.

"Whoa that's so cool, I've never met a mermaid," Kirishima said excitedly. Midoriya was also excited, writing all of it down in his notebook he kept with him.

"So what, you can change to a mermaid on a whim?" Bakugou asked. He looked like he was trying to pester for answers, maybe even to rile her up, but she wasn't budging.

"I can if I am close to a big body of water," Jirou said with a smile on her face. Bakugou huffed and smirked, turning around to head back to his food. The rest of them followed, getting Jirou a plate of food as well.

"So Jirou was wanting to know if it would be alright if she tagged along. She hasn't seen much of the world, but would like to," Kaminari said as he was handed a plate. The group looked at each other for a moment and contemplated silently. Jirou looked like her heart was about to break from the silence.

"Well I don't see it as a problem. There could be a use for her skills on our journey," Todoroki chimed in and said. Jirou smiled at his response and the rest also smiled as well.

“Yeah besides it would be nice to have another shapeshifter in the mix, at least one that can swim of course,” Kirishima said as he gave her the thumbs up. Bakugou rolled his eyes and hummed in agreement. He wasn’t much for words, but that was enough for the group to consider adding her.

“I think since I joined, maybe I could play a song in celebration,” Jirou said as she pulled out her harp and strummed the strings.

*Upon one summer's morning, I carelessly did stray,
Down by the Walls of Wapping, where I met a sailor gay,
Conversing with a bouncing lass, who seem'd to be in pain,
Saying, William, when you go, I fear you will ne'er return again.
His hair it does in ringlets hang, his eyes as black as sloes,
May happiness attend him wherever he goes,
From Tower Hill, down to Blackwall, I will wander, weep and moan,
All for my jolly sailor bold, until he does return.
My father is a merchant—the truth I now will tell,
And in great London City in opulence doth dwell,
His fortune doth exceed £300, 000 in gold,
And he frowns upon his daughter, 'cause she loves a sailor bold.*

The group had stopped eating their meal and had listened carefully to the song that was being played for them. It was soothing and peaceful, like it was meant to be a dream and not a performance. Momo and Todoroki cuddled next to each other, while Bakugou and Kirishima did the same as well. Kaminari moved to get closer to Jirou while Midoriya sat on her other side, entranced by the song.

*A fig for his riches, his merchandize, and gold,
True love is grafted in my heart; give me my sailor bold:
Should he return in poverty, from o'er the ocean far,
To my tender bosom, I'll fondly press my jolly tar.
My sailor is as smiling as the pleasant month of May,
And oft we have wandered through Ratcliffe Highway,*

*Where many a pretty blooming girl we happy did behold,
Reclining on the bosom of her jolly sailor bold.
Come all you pretty fair maids, whoever you may be
Who love a jolly sailor bold that ploughs the raging sea,
While up aloft, in storm or gale, from me his absence mourn,
And firmly pray, arrive the day, he will safe return.
My name it is Maria, a merchant's daughter fair,
And I have left my parents and three thousand pounds a year,
My heart is pierced by Cupid, I disdain all glittering gold,
There is nothing that can console me but my jolly sailor bold.*

As Jirou finished the song, the group had fallen asleep where they sat, lulled into a silent and peaceful sleep. Jirou smiled and put her harp away, going to the tents to get their blankets. She put them on her new companions before laying on the ground and staring up at the stars. She fell asleep not too long after that.





THREE IDIOTS AND A BABY

BY AMUK

“HAAAAHHHHH!” Mirio yelled as he charged forward. Shield raised, he blocked an incoming attack before deftly slashing with his own sword. His opponent, a rough-looking thief, grunted as she jumped back, narrowly missing a killing blow. Not that Mirio’s sword missed by much—the cut on her arm was sure to sting.

“I can’t find their leader!” Tamaki shapeshifted into a wolf, pouncing on the thief before she could recover. His jaws tore through her flesh, leaving a bloody wound on her shoulder. It was too much for her—the wound, the blood, the *wolf*, and she fainted.

“Thanks.” Wiping the sweat from his eyes, Mirio glanced around the cave, the hideout for a gang that terrorized a local town. A huge system of tunnels and caverns, it had taken them over an hour to find this main chamber. Another twenty minutes to clear it of the thieves and rogues that called it home. Whatever ones were still alive would be taken into questioning, but considering how hard they fought, there might not be many. “I don’t see him either—they said he had a crow’s mask, right?”

“It might just be a beaked mouth, maybe he’s a shapeshifter too,” Tamaki suggested, his voice oddly gravelly. Maybe it was the wolf vocal chords. No matter how many times it happened, Mirio still couldn’t get used to hearing a human voice from an animal. “I’ll check.” Tamaki sniffed the air. “There it is!”

Before Mirio could stop him, he bounded off down a corridor. Damn it, they weren’t supposed to separate. Mirio scanned the room: the bandits were all down, either dead or groaning with pain. None of them seemed capable of getting up, let alone fight. Satisfied, he ran after his friend. “I’m coming!”

“Hurry up!” Tamaki howled, more wolf than man. His cry echoed through the shaft.

That didn’t sound good. Gripping his sword tighter, Mirio sprinted down the dark tunnel. On the right wall, Tamak’s tail disappeared through a door. “Here!”

Barely slowing down to turn, Mirio bounded into the gloomy room and slipped into a fighting stance. Just like the rest of the cavern, the lighting here was a single, flickering bar on the top. No one popped out at his entrance. “How many?”

“One.” Tamaki ran toward a corner, where a bundle of blankets was piled up. He started nosing it. “Hiding. They smell—”

“Smell what?” Mirio heard a hard crunch as he stepped forward. Looking down, he spotted a dirty doll. In a bandit’s hideout. Did it accidentally get mixed in with the loot? Tamaki still hadn’t responded and Mirio’s brow raised. “Tamaki? What is it?”

“Mirio,” Tamaki replied balefully, wolf ears drooped down. He was sitting on his haunches now, his gaze fixed on the blankets. “What do we do?”

“What do you mean?” Leaving the doll behind, he quickly trotted to his friend. They’d fought a whole gang together. Just what was left that could stump his friend? “We—”

Catching sight of the bundle, Mirio cut himself off. Nestled in a cocoon of blankets was a little girl, fast asleep.

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There were few things on this planet as magical as Nejire’s grove. Mirio would know—as a knight, he had travelled to lands near and far and almost nothing took his breath away as that first view as he entered her lands. Graceful willow trees and towering oaks ringed her field, a wide, open field littered with wildflowers. A dirt path led to a secret grotto, which was perhaps his second favourite place.

It was a pity he couldn’t appreciate any of these things. Instead, most of his attention was focused on the little girl in his hands, sound asleep. In the few days he had known her, she had barely said a word, only looking at him and Tamaki with big, worried eyes. A kidnapped child? Possibly, but no villages had reported missing people or even a ransom. Most likely scenario, an orphan taken in or a child of the gang. Either way, she had to have seen terrible things, especially considering how she had trembled when he’d first held her hand.

“We’re almost there,” Tamaki muttered, trotting nervously next to him. He’d taken on the form a giant elk, fierce horns jutting out of his skull. Only animals could find the way to Nejire’s home. “You have them, right?”

“What?” Shaken from his thoughts, Mirio raised a brow.

“My clothes!” Tamaki whispered nervously, his big eyes darting to and fro as though Nejire would pop out at his words. “I need to change before she spots us.”

“Afraid to be caught *buck-naked*?” Grinning, he couldn’t resist the obvious pun. It was just there. And obvious. It’d take a greater man than him to ignore it. Patting the bag looped over his shoulder, he added reassuringly, “Don’t worry, I made sure to grab them.”

Tamaki sighed in relief. “Thanks—”

A breeze ruffled through his hair before he could add anything and Mirio could almost hear Tamaki's groan. Within seconds Nejire appeared before them, forming out of the wind itself. She hovered over the ground, her simple white dress fluttering around her knees. At the tips of her blue hair, mini-tornadoes formed, harmless to touch. Her bright eyes were open and staring at them as she floated in the air. "Hey, you're here!"

Surprised, Tamaki transformed back into a human out of reflex. A burst of smoke rolled off him, hiding him from sight, but not before they both caught a glimpse of his bright red skin. With a yelp, Tamaki dived into the bushes. Nejire blinked, surprised. "Tamaki?"

The bushes rustled and Mirio could just barely make out Tamaki's eyes peeking out of the leaves. "My clothes."

"Hey, hey!" Nejire landed on the ground and crouched in front of the bushes. With a frown, she started to reach into the bushes. "I've seen you naked before."

"Accidentally!" Tamaki hissed, clarifying immediately. He swatted her hands away.

"It was multiple times!" Nejire grumbled, rubbing her sore hand.

"Every time was an accident!" Tamaki's hand poked out of the bush, as red as a lobster's. "Clothes!"

Mirio chuckled. Well, that was to be expected as a shapeshifter. Animals didn't really wear clothes, after all. Shrugging off his sack, he dropped it into Tamaki's waiting hand. "Here you go."

"I don't get it." Nejire puffed her cheeks, sulking as she stepped back. "What's the big deal?"

"Uh..." Mirio scratched his cheek, not sure how to explain any of this. Especially to a sprite that only started wearing clothes because Tamaki was going to die of a heart attack every time they met otherwise. "Well, he's shy?" It was partially correct, at least.

"Sure." Nejire clearly didn't believe a word but she let it go. Rocking on the heels of her feet, she glanced at him. "What's with the blankets?"

"Right." Mirio glanced at the bundle in his arm. He'd almost forgotten why they were here in the first place. Fortunately, Eri hadn't woken up yet. "I need your help."

"My help?" Nejire clapped her hands excitedly, her powers spiking and making her float. "We haven't gone on an adventure together in ages!"

"Last month," Tamaki corrected, emerging from the bushes fully dressed. "We went together last month."

“That was long ago!” Nejire argued, before grimacing. “Why are your clothes so bad?”

Tamaki looked away, rubbing his arm uncomfortably. “It’s easier to slip out of them.”

Mirio couldn’t argue about that—while everything Tamaki wore now was oversized and ill-fitted, he didn’t have to worry too much while he was shapeshifting. His pants, so loose they actually needed a belt to stay on? It’d just drop off as he transformed. An irregular tunic? Cheap material that wasn’t a loss if Tamaki tore right through them. They’d learned the hard way what happened to nice clothes the last time they attended a banquet.

“Yeah, I get that.” Nejire rolled her eyes, leaning forward to poke at his chest. “But there’s fashionable baggy clothes.”

An old argument. Mirio stepped between them before they got trapped in it again. “Anyways, I need your help.” He uncovered Eri’s face, showing her to Nejire. “This little girl—”

“You’re pregnant?” Nejire shrieked, her hands pumping excitedly as her eyes darted from Eri to Mirio. “She doesn’t look like you. Is that normal?”

“WHAT?” Mirio felt his ears burn and he was sure his skin colour was only a shade away from turning into Tamaki’s at this point. “I’m not...t-this isn’t...”

“People don’t work like that.” Tamaki’s lips twitched, clearly suppressing his own laughter.

“Yeah!” Mirio shook his head furiously. “Also, she’s three. That’s not what a human baby looks like.”

“Oh.” Nejire’s shoulders slumped, disappointed. “I see.” After a second, she perked up again. “You got someone else pregnant!”

“No, we were catching a gang of thieves and found her at the hideout!” Mirio clarified quickly, before the misunderstanding could get any worse. He knew nymphs and other magical creatures had different norms, but even this? Seriously? If his skin got any redder, any hotter, he could cook an egg on it.

“You got a gang member pregnant?” Nejire looked at him pityingly. “Mirio...that’s a tragic romance.”

Mirio hit his head against a tree.

"We're almost there," Nejire chirped cheerfully, skipping ahead of them on the forest path. "But do we really need to talk here? What's left to even discuss?"

"Something important." Mirio glanced down at the little girl clutching him tightly, as though she would get snatched away the second he let go. Her tiny hand wrapped around his finger. He'd never realized just how small she was until now. Even during the ride to Nejire's place, he'd been more wrapped up on what he had to do. "I think the gang might try to take her back and we need to talk somewhere safe."

"Safe, huh." Nejire grinned, turning around walking backwards. She rubbed her nose, proudly puffing her chest. "Hey, hey, nowhere is safer than my field."

"Yep." Tamaki pulled his hood tighter over his head. Ahead of them, the forest path ended, opening up to a field of wildflowers. "I can wait here."

Eri glanced at him nervously, her lips curving down. As her wide, worried eyes bored into him, Tamaki looked away. "...I'll stay."

"Hey, hey." Nejire pointed at herself, feeling a little left out. "I'm a good person too."

Eri shuffled to her left until she was partially hidden behind Mirio's legs. Her head peeked out as she studied Nejire. She'd been like this ever since she woke up in the middle of their reproductive argument. Which, in hindsight, was hopefully something she didn't hear any part of. Not recognizing any of their surroundings or Nejire, she'd hid behind Mirio until he managed to coax her into walking beside him.

To be perfectly honest, Nejire wasn't really what you'd call a normal person, so Mirio could understand her fear. Crouching down, Mirio patted Eri's head gently. "She's a good friend."

"Your friend?" Eri whispered, her voice cracking from disuse. Her body pressed against his as she took in Nejire.

"Really," Mirio confirmed, straightening up. He held out his hand for Eri to grab. "I know you'll like her."

Doubtful, Eri grabbed his finger again. Well, it wasn't much, but it was a start. Though, clearly Nejire didn't see it that way, with the way she dejectedly continued to lead the way. As they entered the clearing, she half-hearted gestured at the expanse. "Welcome."

"Wow!" Eri gaped as they entered the field of wildflowers and Mirio felt his own jaw drop. It was even prettier than last year. While the forest surrounded it, the field was filled with only flowers, more colourful than a rainbow. Her head turned this way and that. "Pretty."

“Very pretty,” Mirio agreed, crouching next to her. He broke off a pink flower and tucked behind her ear. “And now you’re pretty.”

Eri’s chubby fingers touched the flower tentatively before she broke into a shy smile. Glancing at Nejire, she leaned forward and whispered into Mirio’s ear, “She looks like a princess.”

“Oh.” Mirio felt a wave of relief at that—so she wasn’t really scared of Nejire. Just nervous. Just shy. Nodding, he whispered back, “You should give her a flower, she’d like that.”

Eri’s eyes widened. Her fingers nervously twisted her shirt as she glanced at him, and then at Nejire, before finally shaking her head and hiding behind him. Mirio laughed, maybe it was a little too fast for that then.

“Mirio.” Tamaki tapped his forehead, worry colouring his voice. “We have to ask.”

Mirio glanced at him, then at Eri. The reason they were here. A part of him was scared to ask, because he knew that once he asked, he couldn’t unask. Couldn’t unhear. Still, if he was scared, how much more scared was Eri? Putting on a brave smile, he asked, “Hey, Eri, could you show Nejire your forehead?”

Eri pulled back and blinked. Her head cocked to the side, not comprehending.

Nejire had an identical expression, confused. “What are you talking about?”

“Eri has this little bump on her forehead.” Mirio gently coaxed Eri to stand in beside him, his arm wrapped around her shoulder. Slowly, he pulled the hair away from her forehead, exposing the growth to the sunlight. Her little body trembled but she didn’t pull away.

“There’s something magical about it.” Tamaki rubbed his shoulder, averting his gaze when Nejire turned to him. “I can smell it...it’s strong.”

“Strong, huh?” Nejire crouched in front of Eri. Her hand on her knees, she peered up at the girl. “Is it okay if I touch it?”

“Y-yes.” Eri swallowed, nodding her head slowly. Her big eyes followed Nejire’s hand as she reached up to touch it. At contact, she winced and squeezed her eyes shut. When nothing happened, she timidly opened her eyes once more.

“Huh.” Nejire’s smile stayed on, but her tone dropped a notch, more serious than silly for once. Her eyes narrowed. “I can feel it.” She pulled her hand away suddenly, staring at it. “Interesting.”

“Interesting?” Mirio wasn’t sure if that was good or not.

“It’s...an erasing magic? Something like that.” Nejire tapped the horn again before sitting back on her haunches. Pulling a lock of hair, she drew it forward for him to inspect. “See?”

“See what—” Mirio’s jaw dropped as he realized that Nejire’s hair actually looked like hair for once. No tornado curls, no bits and pieces disappearing and reappearing. Just human-like hair, to match a very human-like girl. All of Nejire looked human-like for once, even her usually sparkling eyes seemed dimmed. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” Nejire waved away his concern. “It’ll come back.” When Eri’s face fell, Nejire added, “Don’t worry, your magic isn’t that powerful yet.”

“Magic?” Tamaki winced, pursing his lips together. “Then...a witch’s coven...”

“That’d probably be the best place to take her. They can help her control it.” Nejire stood up straight now, stretching her arms above her. “But enough of that gloomy talk!” Tapping the side of her head, she grinned. “Hey, that flower looks really pretty on you.”

Flustered, Eri brushed her fingers against the flower. A shy smile bloomed on her face. “T-thank you.”

“And you’re all staying here tonight.” Nejire rested her hand on her hips, gazing determinedly at the forest. There was an almost predatory gleam in her eyes. “I’ll get food. Berries and meat, right? That’s what people eat?”

“How do you not know that?” Tamaki muttered, staring at her in disbelief. “You’ve seen us eat.”

“Yeah, but I haven’t seen little you eat.” Nejire replied matter-of-factly, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. After all that they’d discussed today, Mirio wasn’t sure what was common sense anymore.

“That’s not what a...” Tamaki rubbed his forehead, a headache forming. Giving up, his shoulders slumped. “Fine, whatever.”

Mirio chuckled. Nejire was a force of nature, it was almost impossible to argue with her. Even harder to win an argument against her. Feeling a tug on his shirt, he glanced down to find a bright blue flower. Eri held it out to him. At his stare, she mumbled, “So y-you’re pretty too.”

His eyes widened, for once not sure what to say, how to look. When she shifted nervously, Mirio caught himself and curled his hand delicately around the bloom. “Thanks.” There was a burning sensation in his throat, his eyes watery, but he pushed it away. “It’s beautiful.”

Eri's expression brightened and she turned to the other two. Feeling a little more courageous, she took a step toward them. "For...you two." She held out a hand, two flowers resting in her sweaty palm. "So you're pretty," she added, anxiously.

Her other hand clutched the hem of Mirio's shirt and he wiped his eyes before they got anymore watery at the sight of a tiny, brave girl.

Nejire had no such complications. The second she spotted the flowers, her eyes gleamed with unshed tears. "Awww," she cooed, taking a pink flower. She tucked it behind her ear immediately. "What do you think?"

Tamaki picked the other one, an orange blossom. "It smells nice."

"...you look like a princess," Eri mumbled, shyly looking down at her toes.

Speechless, Nejire's jaw dropped. Her arms flung around Eri's, giving her a tight hug. "We're keeping her."

"What?" Tamaki stopped sniffing his flower. "We can't do that."

"Why not?" Nejire pulled back, gazing at Eri. "You want to stay with me too, right?"

"Huh?" Eri's eyes widened, the thought never crossed her mind before this. "I can?"

"I see. I have to win you over." Letting go, Nejire pulled back. She squinted, scrutinizing Eri. "You're hungry, right?" Without waiting for a response, she turned on her heel and sprinted to the forest. "Hey, hey, you'll have the best meal ever."

"What in the—" Tamaki sighed, his shoulders slumping. He glanced at Mirio. "We have to stop her."

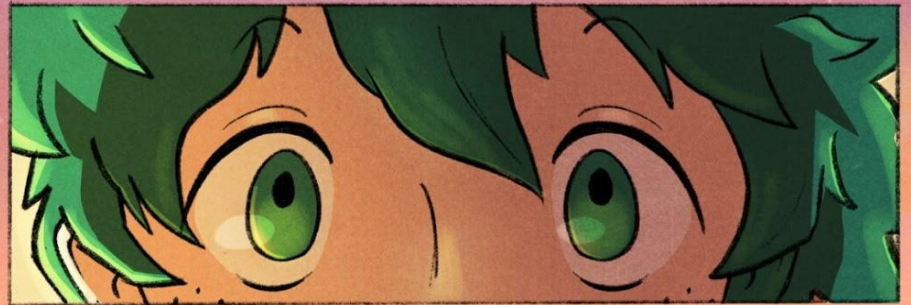
"Yeah." Mirio twirled the blue flower in his finger before tucking it behind his ear. "Yeah, of course."

Yet Eri's hand was still holding his shirt and he wasn't sure if he could tell her to let go. He wasn't sure if he could let go himself. He was a knight. Nejire was a nymph. Tamaki, a shapeshifter. If the three of them couldn't protect a little girl, who could? Maybe, just maybe, it'd be better if they all stayed together.

"She's so fast!" Eri chirped, looking up at him with a wide, bright smile. For once, she looked like an ordinary kid, open and eager to explore. Entirely unlike the child he'd found in the bandit hideout, shaking and terrified.

Maybe Tamaki was right, maybe they couldn't keep her here. None of them had any skills with raising a child. Yet, for that smile, he wanted to try. Nejire could teach her magic and he could teach her everything else and maybe, just maybe, Eri could know a little about what an ordinary life was like.





HERE FOR YOU

BY SPADA

Todoroki Shouto absolutely, utterly, wholeheartedly hated his life as a prince.

Why would anyone dream of being the heir of a worthless crown, living in a castle too large for its inhabitants and filled with the rich who wanted power and money?

He sighed, glancing at his tutor and meeting his sharp eye before he turned back to the work in front of him. It had already been two hours since he began his studies for the day, which were, in his opinion, completely useless. Nonetheless, he continued; he wasn't in the mood to get yelled at by his father again.

When he finished, his teacher took his papers wordlessly, looking over each answer and nodding in affirmation.

"Excellent as always, my prince," he said. "I will report your scores to your father. You are dismissed."

As soon as the door closed behind him, Todoroki clicked his tongue and let out a frustrated sigh. Every single day was filled with duties and responsibilities that he never wanted. Never once did he ask to be prince nor Todoroki Enji's son. If only he had been born into a nameless family, he would have been gifted with a normal life away from power and royalty.

Yet here he was, living a life he would give up in an instant.

A knock at the door brought him out of his stupor, and he quickly responded, "Enter."

With a slight creak, the door opened, revealing his royal guard, Kirishima Eijirou. The only person that Todoroki appreciated within the castle.

"Hey, looks like you're done with your studies," he said, closing the door behind him. Todoroki scoffed.

"For now," he bitterly spat, taking a seat on his bed and letting out a sigh. He heard Kirishima chuckling, and Todoroki shot him a glare.

"Er, well, sorry to burst your bubble, your highness, but..." Kirishima paused and Todoroki knew his next words.

"My father wants to see me."

"Unfortunately."

With an annoyed huff, Todoroki got up, heading straight towards the door.

“Let’s go, then,” he said and, without turning around, he added, “And what did I tell you? Do not address me as ‘your highness’ again.”

+ + +

Like always, meeting with his father always ended badly. The two would never see eye-to-eye, and Shouto would rather go to hell than agree with his father.

“Shouto! Don’t walk away from me, come back this instant!”

Enji’s yells were heard loud and clear, yet Shouto fumed, angrily walking out of the king’s throne room with Kirishima following close behind.

“Shouldn’t you go back, your high—I mean, Shouto?”

Wordlessly, he continued down the hall with only one destination in mind: the castle gardens. Through the twists and turns of the stonewall halls, he avoided all eye contact with passing maids and servants, finally reaching the large door that led to his escape.

The sun was bright, making Todoroki shield his eyes as he walked out onto the cobblestone path. Quickly, he made his way towards the central area, an open space surrounded by trimmed shrubs and flowers, both native and foreign from other lands. And in the middle of it was a shrine, one dedicated to his mother.

The Queen.

With an angry huff, he seated himself on one of the pristine white benches that faced the shrine, littered with fresh flowers. The day was bright, and Todoroki basked in the warm sun, listening to distant whistles and voices of townspeople.

He imagined a life where he was a normal boy, living with parents who worked in the town, perhaps as merchants, or maybe blacksmiths. They would live in a small home, warmed by homemade meals, a small fireplace, family.

His mind wandered to his siblings, those banished from the kingdom by Enji as they were deemed unworthy to be considered royalty. What would they have been like?

He cursed under his breath, closing his eyes.

No one would ever know who Todoroki Shouto truly was. They would only know the prince, the heir to the kingdom. Nothing more, nothing less.

+ + +

Midoriya Izuku undoubtedly loved the thrill of adventure.

Stepping out from the safety of his home, he found a world filled with undiscovered secrets just waiting to be uncovered. Unlike the small world drawn from the words of his father's old books, Midoriya found a never ending journey waiting ahead of him.

Of course, that journey brought dangers; but he never expected for *this* to happen.

A purely unintentional encounter with a wicked witch had led him to his current predicament.

Lost in the depths of a forest, Midoriya stood at a mere five inches, human body long gone and replaced by the body of a rabbit. His small paws kicked up dust as he ran through the grass. As he ran, the unfamiliar instincts brought with his curse overwhelmed his consciousness, flooding his frantic mind with even more panic. Uraraka and Iida were nowhere to be seen, and he didn't know what to do.

All he could do was run, run, run.

Where am I? The question rang in his head as Midoriya looked at his surroundings. He had gone deeper into the forest, running through the foliage before he eventually found himself in what appeared to be a large garden. Trimmed flower bushes and other beautiful plants decorated the space, and Midoriya couldn't help but admire how beautiful it was.

His soft steps suddenly stopped and he looked up. His eyes met mismatched ones and a sudden shock of fear rippled through his entire body before he froze. His instincts told him to run.

But on second thought, as he took control of his consciousness and pushed his instincts back, he realized that the man in front of him looked far from dangerous.

The human said something, his deep voice was calm and low, but he couldn't catch it amidst the haze of fear. His hand was outstretched in front of him, and pushing through the dark haze, he took a step forward with his small paw.

+ + +

Todoroki was surprised

"I haven't seen you before," Todoroki said softly, using a finger to pet the small animal's back. "Where did you come from?"

He knew that the rabbit wouldn't respond, but he voiced his thoughts, watching the peculiar animal as it leaned into his touch. Strange. Many of the animals within the castle gardens were wild, fearful of humans and running whenever they even heard so much as a footstep. But this rabbit was the complete opposite.

"I got attacked by a witch and got turned into a rabbit. I need your help!"

Shouto was surprised at the sudden stream of squeaks that escaped the rabbit, as if it was answering his question.

"You really are a strange one."

"I take offense to that."

The rabbit squeaked again, and to Shouto, it seemed like it was almost pouting. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but there was something *strange*, something definitely different about this rabbit compared to others.

As if the rabbit was human.

"Prince Shouto!" Nearing the shrine, Shouto turned around to see his father's personal knight, Hawks, entering the gardens. With a sharp glare, he quickly scooped up the rabbit in his arms, despite its violent protests, and ran towards the opposite pathway. He didn't want to face his father, not yet.

When Midoriya looked up at his captor, he stopped squirming when he noticed that the boy looked angry, sad, and most of all, lonely.

Maybe, *just maybe*, he could do something about it.

+ + +

The moment they arrived at the prince's room, Todoroki was taken away by an unfamiliar face, leaving Midoriya alone. With time alone, Midoriya sat upon the prince's bed, taking the opportunity to sort out his thoughts. For now, he would see what happened. Maybe there was a way to communicate with him...

Lost in his thoughts, he jumped in shock when the door suddenly swung open and slammed shut with a violent bang. Todoroki entered the room, slamming the door behind him. He stood in the center, fists clenched at his sides and nails digging into his palms. He looked up, completely ignoring Midoriya and eyes locking with the stranger who stood in the mirror.

That wasn't *him*.

The man who stood in the mirror *wasn't* him, he wouldn't allow it.

With an angry shout, he took a step forward, bringing his fist back and using his strength to punch the stranger. The mirror shattered, his reflection breaking with a sharp crack.

Midoriya curled up, frightened at the other's display. His instincts went haywire, but he focused. He had to calm himself, so he could help Todoroki.

The voices telling him to run vanished, the blaring alarms muted as he calmed himself.

Todoroki had crouched down, clutching his bloodied fist as he hissed in pain. His eyes caught onto movement, and he looked over to see the rabbit walk hesitantly towards him. He made no move, watching the small animal as it made its way over to his lap, brushing his head against his leg as if to reassure him of its presence.

As if to say, "*I'm here for you.*"

With an angry sigh, Todoroki forced himself to take his mind off his anger, using his uninjured hand to pet Midoriya.

"I'm sorry, I—" Cutting himself off, his shoulders slumped in defeat. The hot anger that exuded from his body disappeared, replaced with cold resentment.

"I want to run away," Todoroki whispered. "I want to leave this life behind, because no one in this castle *knows* who I am. All I am is a prince, and I want to throw away this crown, this name, everything."

He was answered with tense silence, and he chuckled pitifully at himself.

"And now look at me. I'm speaking to a rabbit because I have no friends."

Midoriya frowned, or at least, he felt like he did. With cautious steps, he inched over to the prince, rubbing his head against his leg.

"*You might not see me for who I am either, but know that I'll be here for you.*"

Todoroki's anger began to dissipate as he felt the rabbit move against his leg comfortingly. A sigh escaped his lips and he looked down.

"I don't think I've ever been comforted by a rabbit before," he joked, a sad smile on his face. "But thank you."

His hand gently cupped the rabbit's body, and he used his thumb to rub his head.

"You're welc—Oh, that feels good."

The rabbit made a noise that Todoroki didn't know it was capable of making. It sounded almost like a purr, and the rabbit's hindleg kicked up.

"You truly are a strange one."

"If only you knew."

+ + +

As quickly as the morning had come and gone, the sun soon set, sinking underneath the horizons and casting its faint glow. After cleaning up his wound, the prince had requested dinner to be served in his room with the main intention to avoid his father. Although, he wasn't alone, accompanied by the rabbit who nibbled on the vegetables Todoroki picked out of his meal.

Afterwards, he freshened up, cleaning himself up before changing out of his royal attire. He had already dismissed Kirishima for the day, and no other duties remained as night fell.

Tonight, Todoroki already decided he would sleep early, mentally exhausted from his father's words and hoping he wouldn't return for one last argument. As he settled into bed, the rabbit quickly followed, finding its place right on top of Todoroki's chest. He wasn't heavy, but as it snuggled into his chest, Todoroki couldn't help but laugh.

"I suppose I'll let you sleep with me," he said softly, setting a hand on its back and petting the rabbit gently. "Good night."

"Good night to you too, Shouto."

+ + +

Midoriya woke up and immediately, he felt odd.

He groaned, shifting his body to the side. His eyes felt much heavier than usual, and he could only describe the feeling in his body as strange. Another groan escaped his lips as he rolled over, and it took him a few minutes to realize he was lying on something soft and that there was warmth radiating from his left.

His eyes widened, taking in the royal bedroom around him and—

“Oh no.”

A whisper escaped his lips and when he heard soft breaths to his left, he slowly, slowly looked over. Todoroki Shouto was sleeping peacefully in front of him, his face only centimeters away from Midoriya's.

“It wasn't a dream, I was...” Midoriya muttered, lying on his back and reaching a hand to his face to make sure he felt his human nose and cheeks and skin. “I...*slept* with the prince. The *prince*.”

No matter how quiet Midoriya was, anyone could sense his distress from a mile away. First things first. He needed to calm down, assess the situation, think of a plan, and maybe—

“Who...?”

Midoriya's eyes widened and he turned his head, green *human* eyes locking with Todoroki's drowsy ones. The two stared at each other for a few seconds, and Todoroki's eyes widened in shock. He quickly got out of bed, throwing the sheets off and reaching for his scabbard at the edge of the bed. Unsheathing his sword, he pointed it at Midoriya, who stumbled out of the bed, tangled in sheets, stark naked, and hands in the air.

“Wait, please don't kill me!” he screamed, his legs trembling underneath him. “I'm not an intruder, I swear. I'm—I'm the rabbit you took in yesterday!”

At that, Todoroki faltered, lowering his sword as he took in the other's appearance. The boy's hair was the same green as the rabbit, and it was the most reasonable explanation for the rabbit not being in sight.

“So you're telling me a *witch* cursed you and turned you into a rabbit, and you somehow snuck into the castle gardens where I found you?”

Midoriya could only pitifully nod, lowering his gaze at the prince's stare. As a human, an *intruder*, he suddenly felt *very* out of place, even more so than when he was a rabbit. Plus, he was clad in a blanket wrapped around his waist, and it only fueled his shame.

“Please, raise your head.”

“Huh?”

Midoriya did as he was told, somewhat confused at the gentle tone of the prince's voice. He expected to be punished for trespassing, lying, and maybe a hundred more violations of the royal law. Instead, he was met with kind eyes.

“If you think I will punish you, you have it wrong,” Todoroki began. “I would never think to send you to the castle prisons, and I doubt you are lying, not with all you have done for me.”

“What...what do you mean?”

“You may have been a rabbit, but you’ve gotten closer to me than any of the royal staff has. Even without words, it felt as if, as if I could *feel* what you were saying. You could have taken advantage of the situation, held me hostage against my father, or used me for money or power, but rather you chose to help when you didn’t need to.”

“Of course!” Midoriya blurted out, before quickly shutting his mouth. “I...I couldn’t just stand and watch you struggle through that by yourself.”

Todoroki couldn’t respond. He hadn’t met anyone like Midoriya before; no one in the castle was that selfless and caring for others, unless it was under the guise for more money and connections. But Midoriya was different. All of it was genuine, straight from the heart with no lies laced into his words.

“I...” Todoroki’s words were stuck in his throat. What should he say? “Thank you. I...I don’t know how I could ever repay you.”

Midoriya shook his head, quickly denying, “No! No need to repay me! I was happy to help! Er, actually, some clothes would be very appreciated.”

+ + +

After sorting out their situation, the sun had begun to awaken, casting its light onto the world.

It was still early enough that most of the castle, along with their king, was still asleep, giving Todoroki the chance to sneak out with Midoriya. It wasn’t hard to obtain two horses from the stable. Kouda was always a kind, quiet man who simply nodded in understanding at Todoroki’s request. No questions asked, the two departed through one of the lesser known gates with all of Midoriya’s necessities packed.

He would never admit it, but he would miss the green haired male. He’s only known the human version of his friend for a few hours, yet he could instantly tell he had no bad intentions. His heart was full of kindness and dedication, and his lionheart could not keep him still. And there was no way that Todoroki would keep him bound when he had his own duties to fulfill.

Midoriya was a naturally born adventurer, as Todoroki learned. With his two friends, a mage who he spoke kindly of and an in-training knight of brilliant knowledge, he had gone on quests throughout the region, helping those in need, no matter how trivial the request was. To that, Todoroki admired the boy, as he had only known people to be selfish, taking advantage of others for their own gain.

Too soon, the two reached the entrance of the village, looking down the dirt path that led through the rolling green hills towards a nearby forest ahead.

“Follow the path, and you’ll make your way to the capital,” Todoroki informed him, getting off of the horse as Midoriya did the same. “May you be safe on your journey, and successful in reuniting with your friends.”

Midoriya smiled.

“Thank you, truly. For everything. I apologize for the inconvenience I may have caused,” Midoriya apologized again, bowing his head and avoiding the other’s gaze. “Although, I *do* wish we could have met in different circumstances.”

Todoroki furrowed his brows. “And why is that?”

“I mean, instead of becoming friends with you as a rabbit, I want to be friends with you as a human instead,” Midoriya confessed bashfully, a shy smile on his lips. “Of course, it’s up to you though! You don’t have to be my friend—after all, I’m just a commoner and I don’t know how you feel about a man who woke up next to you and—”

“I would love that.”

The swordsman blushed as he realized he had begun a rant, but at the other’s words, he grinned so brightly that Todoroki couldn’t help but reciprocate with a gentle smile of his own.

“Then,” Midoriya began, holding out his hand. “I’m Midoriya Izuku, nice to meet you!”

Todoroki stared at the gloved hand for a few seconds and a chuckle escaped his lips. It was a ridiculous gesture, but to Todoroki, it was a first step towards a true friendship.

“Todoroki Shouto. I hope we can be good friends, Midoriya.”



AEOLIANMODE



THE TIRED KNIGHT & DEKU THE HERO

BY ERASEPURRCLOUD

The midday sun glares down on the small town of Yuuei, within the Kingdom of Nippon. Children play in the fields while merchants trade their goods in the plaza. The bard sings his usual tune, as the town residents stroll by. The town is rather serene these days, as it's been years since any real trouble has fallen upon the kingdom. As a result, many of the people in town have become complacent during these peaceful times.

Among them, Eraser the Tired Knight, a noble mercenary who is often called upon by the townsfolk to resolve minor incidents. His cunning and stealth have made him somewhat of a commodity among those looking for his services, though he only takes on jobs that he feels are worth his time.

On this particular day, the knight is enjoying his usual afternoon nap in the plaza, when his young aide—the town messenger—arrives, huffing and puffing with every step.

“Eraser, sire! Urgent message from the capital.”

“Yes, Shinsou? What is it?” The knight inquires, eyes still shut, so he can fall back into a deep sleep if need be.

“It's the princess, sire...” His young aide leans in, his voice dropping to a whisper. “She's been captured.”

For the first time in a while, the knight's eyes spring open wide, now fully awoken from his slumber.

“Are you certain?” the knight responds in an equally hushed tone.

“Yes, sire. It happened sometime after nightfall. The castle guardsmen recovered this at the scene.” The knight's aide holds up a single black feather. The trademark of an evil sorcerer that once lived in the kingdom.

“Chisaki...”

“That's what we believe, sire.”

“But he was vanquished years ago...” the knight muses to himself.

“What are you planning to do, sire?”

"What do you think?" he hisses as he stands from his post. "I'm going to rescue the princess. Gather the cavalry team," he demands as he fastens his sword and sheath to his belt holster.

"Uh, sire... you... you fired the last calvary team." An awkward silence falls among the pair.

"... So I did... No matter. I'll form a new team, posthaste."

"But, sire, where will you find such a team?"

As if the heavens above were listening to his request, from around the corner, a scuffle can be heard. The Tired Knight and his young aide make their way toward the commotion.

"You rat!" An older, bearded, man with a rotund belly howls. From out of one of the shops, a young boy with a freckled face is thrown through the doorway. He stumbles over the entryway, tripping and landing on his backside.

"Please, there must be some misunderstanding!" the boy cries out.

"There'll be a price to pay, kid." The bearded merchant is quick to lift the young boy by the collar and lands one solid punch to his face.

"Is there a problem here?" the knight asks as he makes his way over.

"This child is a thief!" the merchant tells him.

"I assure you, sirs, that isn't true!" the freckled boy insists, his hands raised.

"He gave me counterfeit coins," the merchant says, holding out a few pennies to show the knight. The coins are bent; a telltale sign that they aren't authentic. But the knight notices something else peculiar about them...

"Those aren't mine! I found them on the ground; I just needed something for my mother and I to eat. Please, sir, I mean no trouble!" the boy begs.

"What was he intending to steal?" the knight asks.

"A loaf, sir." the merchant responds.

The Tired Knight turns to the young boy, offering a sympathetic gaze. "Give him the bread," he says, turning back to the merchant with a scowl.

"But... sir..." Before the bearded merchant can continue, the knight hands him four bronze coins. "That should repay the debt. Two pence for the bread. The other two for an apology."

"An apology?"

"For the eye," the knight says, sternly. The merchant huffs a feeble apology, hands over the bread and heads back into his shop. The young boy turns to the knight, with a smile.

"I am in your debt, sire." the boy commends the knight, offering his gratitude with a deep bow.

"Tell me, boy... hast thou any combat training?" the knight inquires.

"I beg your pardon?"

The knight sighs. "Can you fight?"

"Uh, well, sire..." The boy stumbles on his words a bit, nervous to be asked such a bold question.

"Never mind. You'll do. Come with me." the knight says, waving a hand as he begins to walk away. The young boy is hesitant for just a moment, but trails behind the knight.

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The knight and his new freckled companion now walk through the town square together, the latter unaware of their current destination. The boy notices as others stare and whisper things to one another. It is peculiar for the knight to be seen accompanied by someone; usually he's only seen with his aide Shinsou, and even then, he's often spotted in town alone. The knight pays no mind to it, but for the young boy to have all eyes on him is very strange.

"You still haven't told me why you wanted me to come along... to rescue the princess. I'm sure there are dozens of capable soldiers you could ask. What makes you think someone like me can help?"

"The coins you offered that merchant. He might've been too deft to notice, but I could see it." The young boy turns away, abashedly. "Those coins weren't bronze, but copper. That's hard to come by these days. And fake copper, at that, can only be produced by sorcerers."

The young boy stops dead in his tracks.

The knight, however, continues forward, not even turning back to offer so much as a glance. "You know, I'd heard rumors that the Midoriyan clan had lived on and had simply been in hiding all this time. But to think I'd actually find one--"

The young boy latches onto the knight's garbs, a desperate, pleading look across his face. "Please sire, you mustn't tell anyone! If anyone were to find out..." His voice fell to a screechy whisper, hoping no one around will hear the conversation.

“Use your power to help me rescue the princess and I won’t tell a soul.” The boy relaxes, feeling as though he can trust the knight to keep his word. “However, were you to rescue the princess and the people learned of your bravery, I imagine they’d welcome your clan back into the kingdom.” The boy’s eyes light up, having never thought of the possibility of coming out of banishment. The knight continues on. “You could live a normal life again. In fact, you’d be a hero.”

‘Hero’. Something he could never hope to be. But the possibility of it becoming a reality was so tantalizing for the boy. If there were a way to bring his family out of banishment, and be seen as a hero, he wanted to take that chance. And here the chance was, right in front of him, in the form of a tired knight.

“By the way, I’m not sure I caught your name,” the knight says, finally coming to a stop and turning to face the boy. “What be it?”

A pause. “Deku, sire.”

“*Deku the Hero*,” the knight says, turning away from the boy and continuing his pace. “I’d say the name suits you well, boy.”

“Aye, Sire,” he declares, with determination. Here is his chance to become a hero, no matter the cost. He has to reach out and take it. “I’ll do it.”

And so, the young boy joins the knight on his quest to rescue the princess. Afraid that he may not possess the power needed to successfully retrieve the princess, Deku sticks closely to the knight for support, and listens intently to everything he says, hoping to gain something from his skills as a mercenary. Their first stop is to the local blacksmith in town, to provide Deku with a weapon.

He chooses an axe, thinking it would be the most powerful weapon, though the knight insists it’s the wrong one for him. The knight instead requests a rather dull looking shortsword for the boy. That kind of weapon is usually more meant for rogues and mercenaries, but it’s also a good starter weapon; especially for someone as small as him. He places a hand on Deku’s shoulder and simply tells him to trust in his skills. The knight, in turn, chooses a rapier—a trusted favorite of his. He always goes for the most reliable weapon; one he can wield with confidence. In addition to the rapier, he also equips himself with a longbow, as ranged attacks are one of his specialties. Fully equipped with weapons and supplies, they finally embark on their journey.

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The three-day trek through the dense forests, just outside the kingdom’s walls, is the most exhausting part of their journey. They’re fortunate enough to have the sun out to help them survive. Had it been winter, they would not survive the bitter cold and lack of food. When they stop in a nearby town to rest and get a meal in them, they’re warned by the village people that there were rumors the evil sorcerer Chisaki had been spotted just outside their village a day or two ago. They know they’re on the right path to rescue the princess. They thank the village people for the rest, food, and information before heading on their way.

After another two days, they finally come across the underground passage, where Chisaki is located. They make their way inside and are met with an empty, cold, yet decently lit cellar. The princess is there, chained to a chair by her wrists and ankles, while Chisaki stands in front of her, dressed in a dark purple cloak with black feathers around the collar.

“So, ‘tis true,” The knight says, announcing his presence, which is not something he’s known for doing. “The great Chisaki...” He says with disdain and a hint of sarcasm in his voice. Chisaki turns to face the two who have just infiltrated his base. “I thought you were vanquished years ago...”

“Not so,” Chisaki tells him. “If you recall, I had many men by my side who all had various skills. One of which was a revival spell... See, it’s important to have a team that is... versatile.” He says, eyeing Deku as he stands next to the knight, trembling. “All you brought with you was a boy? And a frightened one, at that.”

The knight looks to Deku and can see the fear in his eyes, having never come across someone like this before. Someone with such malicious energy flowing out of him. Someone so evil. The knight feels this may have been a mistake, bringing him along. Maybe this boy isn’t ready to become a hero. The knight steps in front of Deku, taking the lead.

“What do you want with the princess, Chisaki?” the knight shouts, demanding an answer, with his longbow at the ready.

“I’m sure you’ve heard the stories...” Chisaki begins, taking slow steps toward the princess in an effort to taunt the other two. “About the power of the magic apple. A great power passed down through the royal family... that now belongs to the princess.” This apple sits in a glass dome on a pillar near where the princess is. The knight turns on a heel in an effort to get to the princess and the apple, but Chisaki aims his hand at her, a threat for them not to come any closer. “No one knows how it works, but I’m going to find out!”

“And you want that power so you can rule the kingdom, is that it?” the knight asks.

“Rule the kingdom? No... I want to destroy it.” Chisaki says with a devilish grin that cannot be seen, but felt behind his mask.

“We won’t let that happen.”

“If you intend to fight me here...” Chisaki charges up his power; a dark black aura surrounding him. “Then I promise you won’t make it out alive.”

“Stay back, Deku.” the knight instructs him. “I’ll take care of him. You protect the princess.” Deku is frozen in place, afraid of what’s about to ensue. “Deku!” the knight yells, snapping him back to reality. “Go! Be a hero!”

Deku is shocked for a moment, but then nods, determined. “Yes, sire!” As Deku runs toward the princess in an effort to protect her, Chisaki sets his sights on him.

"No, you don't!" Chisaki yells, chasing after Deku. But the knight jumps in between the two of them, his rapier in hand, and makes a clean slice across Chisaki's face. Chisaki falls to the ground, blood trickling down his face.

Rage flowing through him, Chisaki counterattacks, using his magic powers to create concrete spikes from the walls and send them toward the knight. Luckily for the knight, the only magic spell he can cast is one that nullifies any other magic attack. This is the secret to how he can neutralize his enemies so quickly. But Chisaki is a different beast. One he really may not be able to defeat. Because the knight can't keep his spell active for very long and has to consistently re-activate it at just the right moment.

While Chisaki and the knight continue their fight, Deku remains at the princess' side, unlocking her restraints. "It's going to be alright," he tells her. "We're heroes, and we're here to rescue you, princess." Just as Deku gives the princess a big smile to assure her, his gaze shifts back to the fight, where he can see that Chisaki was able to aim a spike directly at the knight's torso, piercing him fully. Chisaki retracts the spike and the knight instantly falls to the ground in a pool of his own blood. Chisaki simply stands there, laughing.

Deku's fear instantly turns to fury at the sight of his new mentor being injured so violently. He grits his teeth, a sense of power welling up within him. As he finally awakens to his sorcerer powers, his entire body charges up, surrounded by green lightning.

Chisaki's no longer laughing. His eyes widen, as he's seen this kind of power manifest before.

"You're a Midoriyan sorcerer..." Chisaki says in a surprised whisper.

"And I'm here to make sure you're vanquished for good, Chiaski! You won't hurt anyone ever again!"

"A boy like you? Go on and try."

Deku charges at Chisaki, ready to engage in battle with him. His power makes him incredibly fast, allowing him to bounce around the room without getting hit. The force of his movements against the walls knocks the princess' apple off its pillar and rolls it at her feet. She doesn't understand why this apple is so special, but if Chisaki wants it so badly for evil purposes, she knows she needs to keep it from him. She grabs the apple, holding on tight to it, as she rushes over to the knight's side.

"Are you okay?" she asks with a timid voice. "Please get up..." The princess grabs tightly onto the knight, not knowing what to do. She cries into the knight's chest, heartbroken that this stranger got hurt because of her. With her face buried in his chest, she doesn't notice the apple starting to glow...

While Deku continues dodging Chisaki's attacks, he continues to ramp up in both speed and intensity. He doesn't know how to use his powers, but thankfully his body seems to be moving on its own. All he can think about is protecting the princess. Even if he's not attacking.

"You won't beat me!" Chisaki yells, getting increasingly frustrated with Deku's power. It's almost as if his brain and his body are going haywire at this point. Chisaki lifts his arm to charge up another attack, but finds a single arrow pierce through it instead. He turns behind him to find the knight, on a knee, his bow having just retracted.

"But... how...?" Chisaki whispers, stunned. He sees the princess holding onto the magic—and now glowing—apple, as well as the knight's injury, which is suddenly healed. While his attention is turned toward them, Deku takes the opportunity to strike from behind as he runs his shortsword through Chisaki's chest. With a look of disbelief on his face, Chisaki begins to disintegrate, hopefully now vanquished for the last time.

"You're safe now, princess," Deku says, smiling and breathing a sigh of relief.

The knight looks to Deku, proud, and rests a hand on his shoulder. "You did it, Deku. You're a hero." He looks back to the princess. "Thank you for saving me, princess. I'm in your debt."

"I guess that makes you a hero, too," Deku tells her with a large smile.

And so, the three of them made their way back to the kingdom, where they lived happily ever after.

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"The end," Aizawa declares, finally finishing the end of Eri's bedtime story. With an ending like that, he expects her to ask a million questions about 'what happens next', but when he looks to the bed, he finds her lying there, sound asleep.

Maybe the story wasn't exciting enough to her, or maybe she felt at peace knowing the good guys won in the end. Either way, Eri had finally fallen asleep, which evoked a sigh from Aizawa, as he was finally able to get some work done.

He gets up from the bed, careful that his movements don't wake the girl, followed by careful footsteps that make almost no sound at all. With his finger to the light switch, he pauses for just a moment and looks back to the young girl he once rescued; safe, and at peace.

"Goodnight, princess," he says with a smile, before turning off the light and closing the door behind him.





WHEN THE CHIMES END

BY MUNCHMUFFINS

There was a tavern hidden deep in the forest, lit up within by a cheerful fire and boastful laughter, and that was where Momo needed to go before starting on her quest. Though she had surrendered to grief while her horse carried her up the mountain, her course was more certain than the weakness of her mind. It was solace that Momo needed, and there was only one place where she could feel at peace.

A siren's call was the calm of the evening. Her voice was faint, eerie like the tears of a mourning maiden waiting for her beloved to come home. Hers was the danger of the blackened seas, the sailor's warning, and yet Momo eased into the melody, for she knew it was her lover singing for her return.

Like her steadfast friend, Momo yearned for a night of rest. But unlike a horse that could walk for days with only apples to eat and water to drink, she needed more. Her head was pounding with stress, and Momo blamed it on the guilt gnawing inside her. She needed to uplift the burden. Cheer herself up, as one would say. Well, what does one know about being a knight, anyway?

She was the cloaked figure entering the den of heathen camaraderie, hiding her armor and sword from the gazes of strangers. If one wanted to approach her, the bellflower crest would tell them that she belonged to the kingdom's army. Word of mouth passed on their victories with horror, leading the people to fear the knights, lest they'd lose an arm or two.

They made her sound like a monster. Momo was fierce and bold, but she had a heart, a heart beating like a wild thing, a heart beating with love for the songstress on the stage. No one knew the girl singing with a lyre once had a fishtail for legs and her songs could drown the men into the ocean if she so desired, but no one should find out. Kyouka had Momo's heart in her grasp, and in return the knight kept her secret behind sealed lips. This was their romance, and for the foreseeable future and beyond, a little bit of trust went a long way for them.

The urge to sit at the front was strong, so Momo took the table at the center, right by her lover's line of sight. She was the first one to look Kyouka in the eyes when they met, beautiful like the storm, and Momo wanted to see it again. She wanted to watch Kyouka sing, the same voice that saved her from drowning once, because she was not a man who wanted to hurt a siren. The knight gave her a heart instead, and Kyouka was enchanted to live on land with her.

It was solace that Momo needed, and there was only one place where she could feel at peace.

—and there, in her eyes, Momo found sanctuary.

"Do you really have to go this time?"

The prince, the royal troublemaker, would see only his mother at the end of a tunnel. It was Momo's duty to protect him, but Shouto didn't make it easy for her. It had warranted a search party the first time he went missing, but afterwards it was nothing but child's play.

Sometimes Momo wondered if finding his mother was the only thing keeping Shouto alive. Maybe Shouto missed her, or he wanted to ask her a question. The reason she left him, perhaps.

If only he knew the truth.

"I have to find Midoriya. It's important." Shouto whispered to her as he mounted out his white horse, his hooded figure draped in black from head to toe. A glimpse of the letter behind Shouto's belt caught her attention before she glared at him.

"This is dangerous. Shouto, this isn't your usual hide and seek. You're the crown prince, for heaven's sake! If that's how you want to go about it, let me go with you."

"No, and lower your voice. I need you to do something else for me. I need you to bring this to my mother."

He held out a white bellflower for her to take. White petals, frail and hunched like one with downcast gaze, afraid to look at death in the eye. The flower was the symbol of their kingdom, but one only gave a white bellflower to those who passed away. It was how they honored their dead.

Momo didn't want to take it. Shouto then spoke to her, his voice hushed and so painful to hear.

"You knew where she was all along, didn't you?"

She did it for his own good. "How did you know?"

"It doesn't matter. Not anymore."

Her fingers trembled, looming above the plant before grasping it hard, like it was a scary thing. It felt brittle, like it would tear apart under her touch. If Momo wanted to break the flower, all she had to do was press a little harder.

"Why didn't you tell me what happened to her?"

Her heart was guarded to engage in battle, to win the war and fight for glory. But she was facing a little boy trapped in the body of a prince, and it was hard not to think of him crying for mother.

"...My duty is to protect you, my lord."

Shouto left Momo standing in silence, her hand clutching the bellflower. The sound of his galloping horse grew quiet as the prince disappeared into the distance. He was trying to keep himself together, because he knew, he knew he couldn't stop himself from shattering into pieces.

But she saw, oh, how she saw his face! Those tears fell down his face as he rode off, submitting to the impulse of running away. He couldn't handle the truth, so what made her think she could deny the reality that she was responsible for the queen's fate?

Momo wanted to run away, too.

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When Kyouka had given up the life of draining men of their souls, she had to find work to survive on land. Singing in taverns gave her pretty pennies to spend every now and then, but she took on fortune-telling for the simple reason that she was bored of staying home all day. Kyouka was once a siren who chose to be human so she could stay with Momo, but her connections to the magical realm was never severed. Her future reading was absolute even if the guise of tarot cards and gaudy, sparkling tents would stamp her as a sham.

And she would've loved to be a sham, because then she could read Momo's fortune and tell her lover it wasn't bound to fate. She always refused to read Momo's cards, because discovering the future has a way of placating the mind with fear, and it sends people down their path before spiraling into despair.

Silly mortals and their curiosity for the future. Why can't they go on their merry way and not worry too much about what lies ahead?

"You're not here for a fortune, are you? I told you, I'm not gonna do it. Not for you."

"I know, but that's not what I'm asking." Momo sat across the round table, drumming her fingers against the moons and stars on the sheet. Kyouka didn't need to look at the crystal ball to know that Momo had fear invading her mind when she asked her. "But I would like to ask you to join me at the cathedral up north. If that's alright with you."

"That's funny. You've never taken me on your journey before. Something's wrong, isn't it?"

Her question was met with silence. It should've been a rule somewhere: never ask the knights about the ventures, but Kyouka hadn't been on land for long. But she could sense it, that sinking aura of a woman who wanted to sleep, because she had nothing else to live for; and thought the eternal slumber would be a remedy.

"Does this really mean that much to you?" Humans were such confusing creatures. They slept, they ate, they grew old, so why were they always so sad? They didn't have to spend a thousand years being bored to death, so what were they complaining about?

"I need you. You're strong, Kyouka, I need you with me," Momo whispered to her, pleading. "lend me your strength, Kyouka. I need you more now than I've ever needed anyone in my life."

For once, Kyouka had doubts about the future. For once, she didn't try to read the cards to see what would happen. For once, she walked blindly into the future, and at that moment, she knew what fear felt like, bursting in her lungs with her heart squeezed by a dark force before she was allowed to breathe again.

For once, she took the leap of faith, and believing to survive in the unknown is the true horror of living.

"Alright. I'll come with you."

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"Is it really written in the stars? The future?"

Her eyes gleamed amber when she was curious, deep and sunken when she was afraid. Kyouka would've succumbed to human instincts if she had them, called Momo a poor little thing for worrying about the future all the time. But wasn't that the problem? Wasting time worrying over nothing?

"That's one way of thinking of it when you can't find an answer in your head."

One shuffle, two shuffles, round and round her hands went as Kyouka sat in her tent, watching her knight gaze at the campfire. There was longing in Momo's eyes, searching blindly within the miniature galaxy of ashes for the meaning of life. Kyouka's cards could tell the past, the present, and the future to soothe anxious minds, but her lover would never tell her what's up ahead. She wouldn't calm her nerves, and it was madness! Oh, but the siren knew, and she chose not to say a word only to Momo.

It was torment for her, even if Kyouka did it out of love. "Why are you doing this to me? My darling, answer me. I'm in the dark here. I feel so lost."

The rhythm of mindless cards stopped.

"Always look on the bright side of life, then."

What foolish creatures humans were, fussing over a single thread that they can never see their purpose in the pattern of a grand design.

Of course she would scoff. Momo was only human, after all. "Easy for you to say. If you can't see the unknown, you'll be scared, too, like the rest of us."

"So, is that what you want? To be a victim of circumstances? The universe doesn't owe you purpose. Stop pretending like it should. You're braver than you think."

She was a brave and powerful woman, born with the spirit of Mars and the greatness of Jupiter. Kyouka could see that, crystal clear like their first encounter, and to her, Momo could wear the strongest armor to cover herself and she would still wear her heart on her sleeve.

"What would you do if you were me? I can't stay in one place, can I? I need to move forward, but I'm not ready. Not right now. Can't I find my way first? I need a little more time, that's all."

"Well, nobody said you can't wait."

Moving forward was a dark, uncertain road. A leap of faith, and one was not to walk without a light.

Who could say that faith would hold her hand down the path? No one knows for sure, but it might shed some light to believe that everything will work out in the end. So the siren whispered in her heart a magical secret, not of the future, not of devastating promises of brighter, better days. Nothing but the reminder of her power to choose.

Pick a card, darling, any card.

Time healed all wounds, and love would find a way.

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The queen was once a legend trapped in human form, in her marriage to the king and bore him children as per his wishes. Before she could take her last son away to the heavens with her, he exiled her to the cathedral where she remained until the end of her life. The rose window remained whole, casting down light on the grave at the center of the small garden on the floor, though the queen didn't leave her body six feet beneath the headstone. She left her spirit in the stone walls and cloisters, forming a barricade of moss as if she tried to break free once, and was forced to surrender by an unfathomable force.

No one truly knew what happened, and yet Momo felt as if she were to be blamed.

She had trained to be a knight once, and all she had to do was join the king's squad and watch how they protect the queen. They were men with a drunken stupor and slurred words, she remembered. They weren't surprised to find her missing one day. What happened on that day was a mystery that the others brushed off without a care in the world, but the horrors caught up to Momo years later when she realized the queen was innocent in all of this.

And what had she done to help? Nothing.

Momo clutched onto her tarot card in one hand, squeezing the balanced scale into a broken seesaw, justice ruined. The white bellflower in her other grasp was bent and twisted so gruesomely that it wouldn't be crying - it would be screaming.

"It wasn't your fault, you know." Which was the truth. "You couldn't have known what to do." Which was also the truth. "All of these things happen for a reason." Which was a lie, but it seemed to bring solace to believe that tragedies happen for a greater purpose.

"I know," Momo's voice was somber, almost too quiet, "but sometimes I wonder if I could change the past. Maybe things could've been different."

It wouldn't be the first time Kyouka heard of the same wish. She heard it too, from clients coming in and out begging to be told what will happen. There was always nostalgia, and what an addictive poison it was to imagine if there was a better outcome after all that was said and done.

"Well, what can you do? The future is what you make of it. Take your time."

Kyouka didn't deny Momo her right to process her feelings, to cry it out. Regret was a shared and profound pain. It brought people together, to try and heal each other, and while Kyouka couldn't tell her about the future, she embraced Momo from behind as if she were the knight's shield. She wasn't impervious, but she could teach her how to find the light to carry on, to help her stand on her own again.

To help others heal from their wounds.

That was the true meaning of sanctuary.





A BARBARIAN'S GIFT

BY BLAQUE

The meeting of the dragon and barbarian had been a fateful one. Surely the town heretics would have had the shifter's head or seen him speared for his kinship. Despite being doe-eyed and earnest in heart, this was not enough to tame the masses. The naive fear what they do not understand after all. It was his helpful sorcery that outed him as a dragon shifter, the scenario that caused it was a moral conundrum: save an old hag from an untimely demise with a simple healing lick and trade his fate for hers. Audacious were the townsfolk to embody such horse shit. The nomad would not stand for the tomfoolery of any cynic despite their vast numbers.

So he spoke out without hesitation at the scene unfolding just before his watchful crimson gaze. "Let him go or this hound of mine will make a hearty meal out of all of you."

When the brute spoke, he commanded the attention of all around him. He was robust in appearance, however, he was not your typical oil-glistening brawn. He instead wore battle scars of living tales and skins of hunt and triumph. His voice had both bark and bite much like the wolverine livestock he trained and that accompanied him. With eyes as red as blood, many had their suspicions that he too was born of hell and must be a demon. Though none dared to tempt their fate in combat against the heathen. Even in his vagabond image, there was light about him—lukewarm in feeling but still ever-present. Perhaps it was even found in the bird's nest that was his ash-blond hair. All the same, savagery seemed to be his forte and what he favored. A forward step of him and the mountainous canine at his side was all that was required to validate just how real the threat was. The villagers proceeded as such unhanding the dragon kin and dispersing in hushed whispers.

The rest of their meet and greet tale was what the penmen call history.

In his unwavering care for the world and those around, Kirishima of the Dragon Shifters was gracious in his forgiveness of the skeptics, despite their ill intent. Yet, his wholeheartedness extended beyond that, he befriended the outcast of a brute and thus today's unfoldings were a direct result of their continued and forged bond.

Fit arms collapse around the man's equally fit frame in mandate of the wolverine creatures beneath them.

"Heh. Hold on tight, dragon. I told you I had something to show you didn't I?" Bakugo of the Beast Tamers, as the dragon had come to know him, seemed rather pleased with himself in light of the bone-chilling surroundings and today's holiday. Notably, there was a jauntiness about his tone. Nevertheless, in a swift jeer of the wolf's reins, the creature leaped into a mad dash in pursuit of their destination. Just where was the barbarian taking the dragon on this snowy eve of St. Nicholas?

Crisp were the wintery surroundings. The scenic white on white was blinding, surely the unskilled could succumb to the cold and meet their death in these conditions. Yet, the nomad knew this land and its terrain through and through and would never allow such a fate to meet the dragon—as he had so valiantly proven.

Over the course of a year, they had several encounters, many of the rescue sort, all memorable—even those he wished weren't. In particular his drunken mishap.

The mead that day had been quite potent and thus in a drunken frenzy, he had felt the uncontrollable need to serenade him with song...skin-clad and buttocks about.

No doubt he would never forget such a humorous and arousing sight, the brute red-faced, naked, and singing as well as the hefty hangover he aided in remedying the next day.

With a slow in pace from the beastly courier, it seemed the couple had reached their destination—a small cave of sorts.

In a less than graceful leap from the animal, the man opened his arms as a chivalrous means to help the shifter unseat himself. Quite the opposite of him, he was clumsy as he leaped into his arms. As his hands grasped the brute's strong yet notably curvaceous form, he felt his face heat. He liked the feeling of his hands on his body as well as his prominent pecs in his fall forward to his chest.

The hug had been unintentional yet he would find so much in it, a heart to heart warmth, trust, mild arousal and above all....love, unrivaled and unconditional care.

The mere yard trek into the wayside cavern threatened to fill the men's boots with snow to the very brim. Once inside the cave, its walls proved an adequate shield from winter's hardship. The cave seemed of the common variety.

The ear would tell them it was hollow with little depth for every step they took produced a shallow echo. There was however one thing that stood out. At the heart of the cavity, a stone mantle was erected, aligned with a small hole in the structure's roof. With the opening and hefty snowfall, one would expect the centerpiece to be covered. Yet it was absent of the white flakes. In its place was a single ragged gem. Much could be said about the gem. Notably, it was raw, unrefined, and lackluster. Even in its lacking state, the crystal's color was exceptional, hues of cardinal and crimson seemingly befitting of royalty.

Weather, including the sun and moon were strong entities, forces to be reckoned with, the barbarian had been cooed to by his mother in youth. In the bloodborne craft, she had taught him that these forces could charge items, odds and ends, trinkets, amulets, and even crystals. One's blood could prove to be just as powerful of a force. It was when he combined his knowledge on the two that the gifting gem was formed. The crystal's origin was simple enough, a cliffside mountain that he frequented, and where he had shared his one and only kiss to the dragon.

His hag of a mother had been a witch long deceased. An affinity for magic hadn't been something he had inherited. Despite this, it pumped through every vein in his body. However, the brutish ways of a barbarian had been his calling. Thus, he had a preference for brute strength over charms and chants. Yet he found use for her teachings and the gift that was in his blood. The gem hadn't started off so rich in color but rather lacked it entirely. Its original state resembled that of rough quartz, a simple clouded hue. Equally as hot as he was headed, it had been the savage's blood that had tinted the gem and gave it its current ruby presence, little did the dragon know.

In his curiosity, the redhead was quick to pick the jewel up in an awestruck study. The color was a favourite of his, similar to his own eyes and hair color. But there was something peculiar about the gem, it's temperature.

"Huh? It's warm..." he remarked. Such an oddity considering their bitter cold surroundings.

Warm was the nature of the infatuation they shared, it always had been. A rare smirk found ivory cheeks in recollection of the shifter's gift to him a week prior.

He had been all but surprised to receive a literal piece of him. The present seemed makeshift considering it was a mere mason jar full of baby fangs and scales.

"They're worth a lot...er...if you want to sell them. But us dragons consider them lucky. And... er...I want you to have mine!"

But it was these words that revealed the heart and thought that had gone into the flush-faced exchange. And now it was the barbarian's turn to gift him.

"So what!" In a snap back to reality and viper quick snatch of the item from him, the ash haired man drew a piece of twine from his belt. Carefully he looped the rope around the point of the crystal in formation of a necklace.

"It's for you...and you better not lose it!" He lifted the makeshift jewelry over the man's head, before lowering it to his collar.

"Thank you! I-I..love it and will treasure it!" The action was met swiftly with a beam and bear-like hug.

Warm, again was the only word suited to describe their embrace. With a close of crimson orbs, he relished it. For in actuality this may be the last time he would ever get to feel it.

The truth was there was a war coming. The squabble was of little interest to the barbarian but rather the battlegrounds were cause for discontent. His witch of a mother's grave lay at the heart of the field. Her grave would not be desecrated. He would ensure it or honorably meet his maker while trying.

He would never speak of the true nature of the gift to the dolt. He was certain if he did, he would surely protest or, worse, follow him into the heat of battle. His kind was rare, precious as was his life. The dragon race lived long virtuous lives, twice that of any human. There was no need to shorten it on a hedge witch's barbaric son's account.

At the start of the new year, he'd detail the hidden truth of the gem in a scroll delivered by owl. The details in layman's terms so the often dimwitted shifter understood with ease. He had always found the animal's hooting much to his annoyance however it finally served a purpose: to deliver a message to the dragon's den. Amidst the many scrawling that referenced the gifted gem in his possession, he would discover its true meaning and use. It was bound to the life of his beloved barbarian. The ruby's vibrant status would reflect his livelihood, and should it ever dim...

Appall would etch the dragon shifter's face, tears welling in the corner of each of his eyes at the now settling truth behind the gift. Likewise, across sand and sea, a fiery determination to return from the war would engrave that of the barbarian.



THE PRINCE & THE DRAGON

BY RED_HEADED_RIOT

Once upon a time, there lived a young prince.

He was kind-hearted and spoke softly, beloved by his kingdom.

*As a child, an assassin came in the night for the pure heart beating within his chest.
His mother, the Queen, heard her son's frightened cries in the dead of night, woke her
husband, the King, and ran to his aid.*

*The attempt on the Prince's life was thwarted, but not before the assassin used the torch
in his hand to burn the young boy, permanently disfiguring the left side of his face.*

*The entire castle awoke to the sounds of the Prince's pained screams, and while the
Queen tended to her son, the King made to avenge his heir.*

But not before the assassin disappeared into the night.

*For his own safety as the Crown Prince, he was sent to live in a secret tower, guarded
by the fiercest creature known to civilization: a massive, fire-breathing dragon.*

*No one was to know where the Prince had gone, for he was not to return until he became
a man. Any intruder who may seek him out, or unfortunate travellers who would stumble
across him, could never hope to defeat the dragon.*

However, the Prince would soon come of age.

*As such the King issued a challenge, now that the years had passed and his son had
grown.*

*"Whomsoever can retrieve the Prince from his tower will be showered in riches and
deemed a worthy suitor to the Prince."*

And so began the attempts to rescue the now young man from his tower.

*He watched countless be slain, a helpless spectator to the screams of brave young souls
who met their demise in fire and claw.*

To this day, he still lives in that tower. Isolated from the world, held captive by a beast.

+ + +

Shouto Todoroki is awakened by a fearsome roar that shakes the very tower itself, is summoned to his window by the very human shouts that follow in order to observe the scene unfolding in the courtyard below.

'Ah, more have come again.' The prince's expression falls at the sight of a group of young men clad in shiny, brand new armor facing off with the beast at the front gate. They brandish swords which have clearly never cut down anything but straw dummies. Certainly never tasted crimson blood, much less the blood of a full grown dragon. Enormous red wings stretch high into the air, nearly high enough for Todoroki to reach out and touch. The beast holds its head high, curled black horns shining ominously in the dawn sun; a warning of peril to any enemy foolish enough to accept their challenge. Black tipped spikes stretch tall from the creature's spine, beginning at the base of its skull and running down to its lashing, whip-like tail. Every part of the beast speaks to its strength, particularly from its four sturdy legs, broad trunk and muscular neck; an immovable, unbeatable force.

And yet still these foolish knights try.

Todoroki doesn't linger in the window long enough to watch the bloodshed, but even from the other side of his room, he can feel the heat of dragonfire and hear the screams as it consumes their targets. The sounds no longer cause Todoroki the distress they used to, when he was a boy in a cage, kept under lock and key by a ferocious beast.

He's come a long way since then.

+ + +

The beast has a more difficult time with the group that arrives in the coming weeks.

A young man approaches, whose spirit seems to ring just as loud as the dragon's itself, brandishing a foreign, curved blade and draped in furs and brilliant blood reds. From his window, Todoroki can see a halo of golden hair set in messy spikes atop his head. He swings his blade with arrogant jeers at the beast, but unlike with so many before, Todoroki hears the beast's pained cries. Very few have ever managed to wound the tower's guardian, and for the first time since he was a boy, Todoroki feels the icy grip of fear closing around his heart.

The prince watches the barbarian and the dragon down below, barely breathing as the two go back and forth, trading blows of blade and claw from high noon to the early evening. Only when the sun dips down in the sky do they finally pause, each shaking in exertion and covered in numerous wounds.

Seven hells— this human has evaded every deadly blast of flame, every lethal swipe of steel-sharp talons and teeth, every stomp of the dragon's mighty feet and every lash of tail. The beast barely stands, limbs shaking and dripping crimson blood to the cracked cobblestone beneath its feet. The human is in no better position; leaning on his blade where it stabs into the earth, breathing in ragged pants as blood soaks his clothes and stains bright hair and albino furs in filthy streaks of red.

And then, the human surprises them both. He draws his sword from the ground, shifting unsteadily on boot-clad feet as he raises the blade to the beast.

“I bested you, dragon!” he announces with a belly-deep victory laugh. “Don’t look so spooked. Fortunately for you, I don’t plan on killing you. My reasons for seeking you out have been met. I’ve met many fighters from many lands, and none have given me as good a fight as you just did, beast.”

The dragon regards him warily, head lifting high and wings fluttering at his sides as they close delicately around his bloodied, battered sides.

“Kirishima.” The beast—no, *Kirishima* speaks for the first time *ever* to an outsider. The barbarian regards the dragon standing tall before him with just as much shock as Todoroki feels inside, a hand clenched tight on the cotton laying over the center of his chest.

A moment of silence passes between the two, and then the barbarian’s face splits apart with the same feral grin it possessed when the man first approached with a bellow of a challenge.

“Bakugou Katsuki.” He adds by way of introduction, regarding Kirishima with a tilt of his head before turning his back on the beast and the tower he guards. There’s a few distant shouts as the barbarian rounds up the group who’d come to travel with him. A young woman with wild pink hair and similarly hued skin evades Bakugou’s grasp with a laugh and approaches the beast. Unarmed, she holds what appears to be a cloth-wrapped basket nearly twice her size in both arms, facing the wounded beast not with an ounce of fear but with joy instead.

“I knew our fearless leader wouldn’t seriously wound you. Consider this a gift! Our show of gratitude and appreciation for putting up with him.” She meets his eyes, black and gold meeting black and red, and the beast tilts his head in recognition.

Dragonkin.

“There’s medicine here, for your wounds,” she clarifies, setting the basket on the cobble walkway before backing away, lips curved in a mischievous little grin. “*Nomag coi faestir wux algbo.*” He does not miss her hushed whisper of Kirishima’s mother tongue, and a low rumble builds in Kirishima’s chest in reply.

“***Si huven tokeq ossaluri ihk wux.***” As she takes her leave, Kirishima’s claws close around the basket, delicately scooping it into his large paw. And as the group fades from view, Kirishima turns and disappears behind the castle walls, all threats neutralized.

Todoroki doesn't move until Kirishima does, a shaky gasp rattling his lungs as his sock-clad feet carry him to his heavy door. There was once a time when his hands were too small, too weak to pull this door open. But now he throws it open with barely a heave, running through the dimly lit corridor and down the winding staircase that leads him into the castle's inner yard. By the time this door swings open as well, Todoroki's already bursting into a sprint, gravel crunching underfoot as he rushes to the dragon's side.

"Eijirou!!"

The beast has collapsed behind the safety of the castle walls, laid out across the dirt and gravel, barely clinging to consciousness. He's aware enough of the small human calling his name and running toward him, skidding across the ground on his knees to gently lay his hands on the brilliant red scales of his snout and the upper ridge of his brow, gazing down into his large, half-lidded eye.

"Shouto..." Kirishima's breath whooshes through large nostrils in a long, relieved huff. He'd known his charge was safe in his room, but confirming it with his own eyes, albeit hazy, always released the tension he felt inside when he was away for too long. **"I'm alright... Jus' need to rest.."**

Todoroki can hear the fatigue in his draconic voice, as well as the carefully stifled tinge of pain. A glance over his long body reveals more wounds than Todoroki could spot from his window and his jaw clenches tight.

"You need to get inside. I need to clean your wounds, so you need to shift. Can you do that for me, Eijirou?" Shouto's hand soothingly pets the length of Kirishima's snout, turning concerned eyes back to him. His entire head shifts and crunches across the gravel as he nods, eyes falling closed for concentration. Todoroki pulls his hands away, scooting back as the dragon's body begins to shrink— smaller and smaller until all that remains on the blood-streaked dirt is not a dragon, nor a man; but something in between.

As soon as the transformation is complete, Todoroki is at Kirishima's side, doing his best to be conscientious of the litany of wounds scattered across his naked body. Even in this form, Kirishima is much heavier than he, and wounded this way, the dragon can hardly walk on his own. It's a struggle to carry him to the bath house, but once Shouto has him seated in a stool against the wall, he sets to tending to his wounds.

"M-Medicine.." Kirishima grunts, heading resting back against the rocky wall with a click of his horns. "In the basket... I carried in..."

“Okay. Wait here, I’ll be back.” Todoroki’s hand gently cradles the dragon’s scarred cheek, brief but tender, before heading back up to retrieve the large bundle they’d left behind before. He carries it down into the baths, setting it by Kirishima’s feet and unwrapping the cloth. He’s greeted by an array of salves and rolls of bandages, along with a variety of herbs that Todoroki doesn’t know what to do with right at this moment, but swears to figure out later when Kirishima isn’t bleeding everywhere. He gathers a bucket of water from the spring behind him, soaking a rag in it and using it to wash away the blood coating the Dragon’s tanned skin.

In this form, human skin stretches taut over firm muscles, decorated with sparse patches of scales, far outnumbered by a great many silvery scars. Over the years of being Todoroki’s guardian, and everything that came before it, Kirishima has acquired scar after scar, seemingly never without a fresh wound *somewhere*. Todoroki has always been an easily worried person, placated consistently by Kirishima’s lighthearted laughter, his casual brushes of the things he’d call ‘flea bites.’ And typically, it was easy to allow his worries to fade. Kirishima would smile, and laugh with him, and use his fiery breath to ignite the flames in the kitchens so that they could enjoy their meals together. It was easy to forget his injuries.

Now when Kirishima smiles, it’s through a clenched jaw, through gritted teeth and eyes straining to stay open through the pain of water rushing over open wounds. While it’s easier to move and fit Kirishima’s body into certain places in his more humanoid form, his wounds tend to condense with him, the damage lingering and manifesting into worse wounds on a smaller surface. When the streams of water fade, more blood rises to replace it, and Todoroki’s hands begin to shake.

“Eijirou, please stay awake, listen to my voice.” He summons the dragon’s waning consciousness with a gentle tap of his palm against his uninjured cheek, sighing in relief when brilliant red irises flutter open to meet his own ocean blue and stormy grey.

“I’m awake, Shouto.. I’m here..” Kirishima reassures with a quiet hum, a small shiver rolling across his body from the sting of the water. “H-Hard to sleep at the moment.” He huffs out what should be a laugh, but just sounds like a wince.

Todoroki washes away as much of the blood and dirt from his wounds as he can get, before turning to the salves in the basket. Popping the lid off one of the jars, he spreads a generous amount over a particularly deep gash across Eijirou’s chest, sighing in relief as it stems the bleeding. He repeats the coating for all of Eijirou’s wounds: the gashes across his arms, legs, belly, tail, wings, and then finally his face, coating his thumb and sweeping it across the smudge of crimson staining strands of true red along his hairline, just inside of where his hair parts and makes way for a horn.

"They look worse than they feel." Kirishima's voice calls Todoroki from his steadily rising swell of anxiousness, a clawed hand settling over his cheek and tilting his face up to meet his eyes. He seems a little more alert now, and a shard of the ice clamped tight around Todoroki's frantic heart melts away. In fact, Kirishima's attempt to soothe him draws a short, incredulous laugh from him.

"Only you would sit in a mess of your own blood and tell me it looks worse than it really is." Todoroki huffs in both chastisement and amusement, but Kirishima can spot his desired effect in the human before him; the slight release of the tension wound tight between his shoulders. It's not really a lie, especially the longer they sit here. The salves have stopped the bleeding, and Kirishima's human skin has already begun to mend thanks to his own draconic magic. They won't be fixed immediately, not after amassing the number of wounds both shallow and deep as he has, but the worst of them are healing. He'll be okay.

"Only you would fret so much over an old creature like me." Kirishima returns with a laugh of his own. His voice carries a little stronger already, and Todoroki's frantic hands slow their pace, just enough to steady and spread more of the salve over Kirishima's warm skin instead of shaking and laving over uninjured skin and scale with the valuable medicine.

"You're not much older than me. Dragons can live for hundreds of years, in those terms you're barely adolescent are you not?" Todoroki shakes his head, his smile spreading wider as banter becomes easier for them both. Some of the color is returning to Kirishima's face, and another shard of fear melts away.

"Mmm, I suppose you're right about that." Kirishima nods with a coy little smile, rubbing his thumb across Todoroki's cheek before setting his hand back in his lap to let him finish. He'd learned long ago that it's pointless to try and persuade the prince into letting his wounds heal the old fashioned way via his tongue. So now he simply allows the small human to dress him in loose trousers, wrap up his wounds 'til his heart's content, and then help him make the walk all the way up to his bedchambers in the tower.

The journey drains the last of his energy from his weary body—accelerated healing comes at a cost, after all—and Kirishima barely makes half the distance of the room before his strength leaves him and he drops to his knees on the smooth stone floor. He can already feel Todoroki's concerned grip on his arms, can hear his name on the prince's tongue before he ever speaks it, and Kirishima rushes to interrupt him.

"I'm alright, Shouto. Just tired." He gives the human a weary chuckle as he kneels before him with the grace of a true royal. "My body seems to have decided to rest right here."

“You push yourself too hard, Eijirou... One of these days it’ll be your undoing.” Todoroki’s voice is weary, trailing at the end of a joke that’s much too real to be funny in this precise moment. He worries every time Kirishima leaves the castle. Dragons are powerful beings; it’s not that he worries for Kirishima’s lack of strength, because he doesn’t ever seem to lack that. It’s worry that one day, someone will hunt Kirishima down for being what he is. That someone will want his scales, or his horns, and rope him down and hurt him. The thought of Kirishima in any sort of pain pulls on Todoroki’s heart, leaves him breathless when nightmares of that very outcome wake him in the night.

But, through both nightmares and in peaceful dreams, Kirishima’s warmth never leaves his back. His hands, though clawed and dark like scorched earth, never lay anything more than a tender, loving caress of Todoroki’s soft, fragile skin. His lips, concealing life-stealing fangs behind them, only ever steal kisses from the Prince, as well as the occasional breathy praises that fall in the nights when they’re swept up in one another’s passions.

Those very lips steal a kiss now, and Todoroki holds fast to the clawed hands that moved to cup his face, cradling him as if he were the most precious gemstone in his hoard. The dragon pulls away first, pressing his forehead against his human’s and sighing softly, meeting the fluttering gaze of blue and grey, illuminated by the streams of warm sunlight flooding through the window, with tender crimson.

“The only creature with the power to hurt me is you, Mate.” Kirishima whispers tenderly, moving his hand down to lay flat over the center of Todoroki’s chest, right over his rapidly beating heart. “Nothing will ever pull me from your side, Shouto. Not ever.”

Todoroki can feel the strength behind Kirishima’s words, his oath, and he allows himself to relax, to trust in his guardian, in his mate, the love of his life.

“Thank you, Eijirou.”

+ + +

For his own safety as the Crown Prince, he was sent to live in a secret tower, guarded by the fiercest creature known to civilization: a massive, fire-breathing dragon.

No one was to know where the Prince had gone, for he was not to return until he became a man. And any intruder who may seek him out, or unfortunate travellers who would stumble across him, could never hope to defeat the dragon.

The Prince had now come of age, and with the blessing of the King, many brave, idiotic souls had come to win the hand of the Prince, and favor of the Royals.

But none could defeat the Dragon.

He watched countless be slain, a spectator to the screams of those pretentious young souls who met their demise in fire and claw, thankful for each encounter when the Dragon returned to the Castle.

It would take years before the Kingdom's efforts began to die out.

And years still for the King to relinquish the idea that his son would return to rule.

For, you see...

The Prince had fallen in love.

Deeply, madly in love with his guardian Dragon.

The End.

+ + +

1: Nomag coi faestir wux algbo — *May it serve you well.*

2: Si huven tokeq ossaluri ihk wux — *I wish safe travels for you.*



A DRAGON'S MISTRUST

BY MAPLEFUDGE

"Ei, could you please fucking leave the lizard alone?"

"It won't quit following you around!" Eijirou growls as he's waving the large creature away almost comically. His eyebrows are scrunched in frustration and he's *shooing* the lizard away, stomping on the ground to threaten it ... as if he were trying to chase away a bird.

Baffled, Katsuki watches. They had taken in the gray-scaled lizard a few moons back. It's a large creature, almost Eijirou's size when he's shifted into a dragon. None of them have any idea where it had come from, but it's seemingly been adopted by the group.

"You're ridiculous," Katsuki rolls his eyes and crosses his arms, watching as the creature makes a low, rumbling sound from deep in its throat and looks at Eijirou with beady eyes. The creature cranes its head, puzzled, its tongue darting in and out of its mouth.

Of course, the lizard doesn't go away.

"Leave the lizard alone, Ei!" Katsuki huffs.

Eijirou glares at Katsuki in response, his hands frozen in the air.

Then the lizard makes another sound that suspiciously sounds like a purr. It takes a step forward and nuzzles Eijirou's hands with its forehead. Eijirou *squeaks*, surprised, and he bristles and jumps away. The dry leaves crunch under his feet, startling the creature. "What the hell! Stay away, agh! First you try to steal Katsuki from me by following him everywhere as if he doesn't already have a dragon as a partner—"

Katsuki half-yells, "What are you going on about, holy shit—"

"—now you're spreading your scales all over my hands? Ugh, no, *no!*" Eijirou wipes his hands over his pants as he glares at the lizard. The lizard then makes a low whining sound and shakes its head and when Eijirou walks away, the lizard follows *him*.

"Oh," Katsuki blinks. "Ooh—"

"What!?" Eijirou snaps. When he turns around and notices that the lizard is following him, he snarls, baring his teeth at it.

"Ei, it's not following *me* everywhere; it's following *you!*"

“Why would it follow me? I’m not a rider. You’re a rider!” Eijirou retorts and his expression contorts with such pettiness that Katsuki’s face splits into a shit-eating grin. Eijirou mutters under his breath, rolls his eyes, and starts stomping off to the lake.

The lizard makes a move to pursue him, but Katsuki stops it by planting a palm on its neck. It cranes its head and looks at Katsuki, blinking. Katsuki snorts at the puzzled stare; he’s not as dense as Eijirou, he can tell that it’s somehow treating the dragon shifter as its alpha ... as the leader of the pack. It’s evident to Katsuki, yet Eijirou can’t take a hint. No, he thinks the lizard is trying to steal his rider, haha.

“Kacchan, why are you smiling?” Izuku’s voice comes from behind.

Startled, Katsuki spins around to see Izuku and Shouto approaching him. “None of your business, Deku,” mumbles Katsuki, his cheeks darkening in embarrassment.

Shouto dives straight to the point, ignoring Katsuki’s blush and Izuku’s puzzlement. He asks, “We need to head to town to buy some supplies. Ochako and Tenya have already gone ahead. Please don’t let the lizard out of your sight while we’re gone, or we’ll be paying for more trampled farmyards.”

“You want me to babysit the lizard?” Katsuki asks, bewildered.

Izuku grins sheepishly as Shouto shrugs, and they gather their things before going off on their path to the town, about a half hour’s walk away. Katsuki blinks at the lizard which has settled into some dry leaves, looking undisturbed. It stares at Katsuki with its beady eyes, and Katsuki decides that it would be okay to leave it there to go search for Eijirou.

“Stay,” Katsuki tells it. The lizard cocks its head in response and Katsuki wonders if it can even understand him. Nevertheless, he decides it wouldn’t hurt to tell it not to follow. With that settled, Katsuki goes towards the direction that Eijirou had gone.

It doesn’t take long for him to find the dragon shifter by the river, sitting on a rock near the water and washing his face.

The sound of the streaming river is soft and relaxing. Chirping birds can be heard, too. Sunlight streams through the cracks of the deciduous trees that line the sides of the river. Katsuki easily sees Eijirou, whose red hair makes him stand out amidst all the greenery. Slowly, Katsuki approaches.

Eijirou’s hair sticks to his face and neck, and Katsuki waits as Eijirou rubs his eyes with his hands. Eijirou looks calmer now, a contrast to the frustrated state he had been in—a mood he’s often in, ever since the lizard had joined the group.

“Oi,” Katsuki says. He knows that the latter can hear him. Even when he’s in his human form, his hearing is better. That’s why Eijirou isn’t at all surprised by Katsuki calling him; he’s known that Katsuki’s been there the whole time.

Eijirou grumbles incoherent words under his breath. Biting back laughter, Katsuki plops down on the rock beside Eijirou.

“It’s just ... Katsuki, it’s always in my territory, it’s always near *you*.”

It’s chasing after you, not me, Katsuki wants to say, but he’s learned to be patient. Eijirou’s often reasonable, but sometimes he lets his instincts take over ... such as being territorial over a giant lizard’s advances.

“Figure it out,” Katsuki says gruffly, holding Eijirou by the jaw. Eijirou glares back at him, eyes narrowed.

Again, Eijirou grumbles, and Katsuki can’t make out if it’s an apology or an agreement. Katsuki forgets altogether when Eijirou moves forward and presses their lips together. The kiss comes out of nowhere, and Katsuki’s caught off-guard for a few moments before he composes himself and kisses back.

They haven’t made out in a while, haven’t been alone in weeks. That’s why Katsuki forgets the entire argument when Eijirou grasps his hair with a tight hold, humming against him.

“Ei,” Katsuki mumbles against his lips, and he thinks, *this is nice*.

A growl, low and throaty, escapes Eijirou. Katsuki blinks, confused, as he feels Eijirou’s lips vibrate against him. The sound is unusual and surprises him, and when he pulls away, he sees that Eijirou’s baring his teeth at something behind them.

When Katsuki turns around, he can see that the lizard had followed him. It’s a few feet away, sniffing at the ground and looking up at them with its huge eyes. Katsuki winces when Eijirou’s hold in his hair tightens to the point of discomfort.

“Ei,” Katsuki says, sternly. Eijirou ignores him, and when the lizard steps closer his expression twists. “Shit,” curses Katsuki when Eijirou’s fingers leave indentations on his neck. Annoyed, he smacks Eijirou’s hands away, jolting the dragon shifter back to the present.

“Go away,” Eijirou hisses.

Katsuki’s had enough of this. He’s almost about to tell Eijirou how dumb this is, when the lizard snaps his head up and makes a threatening sound towards their direction. The growl sounds territorial and protective. Katsuki’s eyes widen as he sees the side of Eijirou’s face harden, ripples of red scales forming from his temple to his neck, signalling that he’s prepared to fight.

Eijirou bares his teeth at the lizard. Finally, it cowers, bowing its head as a way of submission. It makes a low rumbling sound before walking back and disappearing to the mass of trees it had emerged from.

“Eijirou!” Katsuki hisses, smacking him against the shoulder.

Eijirou startles, and the scales disappear as he snaps his attention back at Katsuki. “He started it!”

“This is fucking ridiculous, Ei,” Katsuki half-yells, grabbing him by the sides of his face and forcing him to look. “Fucking learn how to live with the lizard. You’re acting like a dumbass!”

It’s slow, and Katsuki can see it—how Eijirou’s expression morphs from surprise to pure fury. It’s rare that they argue. Years of travelling together had brewed a good dynamic, one where they understood each other on a level that others couldn’t. Now, though, they can’t meet in between. Katsuki knows that Eijirou has no plans on backing down when he glowers with such intensity, and as he pulls out of Katsuki’s grip. He says nothing as he jumps off the rock and stomps off, leaving a stunned Katsuki in his wake.

It takes some moments for Katsuki to snap back to reality. He ignores the fact that the lizard lingering near the brush is growling, now, too. The sound resounds from the forest—whatever that’s about, he doesn’t give a fuck.

“Eijirou!” Katsuki yells. He jumps off the rock and stomps after Eijirou, gritting his teeth in frustration. Eijirou doesn’t even glance back, and Katsuki can see the ripples of red scales on his arms. The fucker’s about to shift and will probably fly away, something he did when he was upset with Katsuki. “Oi, get back here!”

Eijirou turns to scowl. He’s just about to say something when another loud growl comes from the forest, startling both of them. There’s a sound of trampling, too. The growling sounds anxious and it’s as if the lizard is thrashing against the trees.

“Your lizard’s throwing a tantrum, Katsuki,” Eijirou says, and Katsuki doesn’t miss the fact that it’s a taunt.

“Makes two of you.” Katsuki throws his hands up in the air in exasperation and decides to check on the lizard, because it’s apparent that he won’t get anywhere here. Eijirou crosses his arms and merely watches him walk away.

Muttering curses under his breath, Katsuki walks towards the forest. The thrashing and the growling gets louder as he wanders deeper between the trees.

That's when he hears it, the undeniable yell of another person. "Hold it down by the damn neck! Snap its mouth shut!"

Oh, shit.

Katsuki runs, shock and adrenaline coursing through his veins. The sounds get louder and he glimpses the wildly distressed lizard behind the trees. His hands crackle, ready for battle—

—when he's hit squarely on the back of the head, knocking the wind out of him. He's thrown forward and crashes to the ground with just enough senses to break the fall with his elbows. "Fuck," he grits as he's thrown towards the ground with a dull pain on his head. Dazed, he sees a group of people trying to restrain the lizard with ropes around its neck and feet. Upon seeing Katsuki, it screams, and there's a sword against its throat.

"Tell it to settle down!" a voice bellows before Katsuki—the person who had struck his skull. Katsuki can see white. When he puts a hand to his head, it's damp with blood. He can take them, he knows it, —but they have a sword against the lizard's throat. Fuck.

"Command it!" the man with the sword says. The lizard continues to struggle, and, in doing so, it slams the surrounding people down one by one, all who attempt to restrain it with greater vigor.

"The dumbass doesn't listen to me, fuckers," Katsuki snarls.

"You're of no use," says the idiot behind him. Katsuki snaps his head to get a better look: a scar covers half his face, and he's holding a bludgeon. The man raises his weapon and Katsuki curses, lunging at the scarred man with a crackling palm because that's all he can do, really, and he's able to take him by surprise. The lizard shrieks, the noise painful to human ears, and the other men curse at its rumble. The man and Katsuki crash to the ground in a scuffle and Katsuki roars as he aims to explode the man's face.

"One more move and the lizard dies!"

Katsuki freezes, eyes blown wide. His crackling hand is in the air and ready to strike, but he can't—he couldn't. Fuck. The lizard cowers as if it also understands the threat.

"Die!" the scarred man under Katsuki grits before grabbing for his bludgeon and aiming at Katsuki's head.

Fuck.

A loud roar resounds through the clearing. The lizard's skin turns into ragged stone and the surrounding ropes rip. The man with the sword panics and strikes at the lizard, but it hits uselessly against hardened scales.

“It’s a mimic!” one of them yells, referring to the lizard. “The monster can mimic its alpha!”

Just like that, the lizard charges towards Katsuki’s attacker. The scarred man freezes in surprise, and Katsuki uses that opportunity to slam him with an explosion. The man screams in pain, clutching his head, and everything after that goes by in a blur.

There’s another loud growl and a flash of red and *heat*. The lizard, which had been rushing towards Katsuki, skids to a stop before them as it snaps its head up to focus on the dragon which has arrived. Katsuki recognizes the heat as he scrambles to get off the man. The lizard growls and is just about to lunge at the man when Katsuki grabs it by the reins of its neck and pulls it to get out of the way. With no other warning, they’re soon in a hellscape of flames.

There’s panic and yelling and the group scrambles to go. The scarred man yells in pain and scrambles to get off, parts of his clothes smouldering. He stumbles to his feet and curses, looking back at Katsuki, the lizard, and the dragon in horror.

Smoke curls out of Eijirou’s nostrils as he growls; Katsuki knows that he’ll let the man go, because it was Eijirou, and he was sometimes dumb but always merciful. Katsuki clutches at his bleeding head, dizzy, and somehow the last thing he sees is the way the lizard’s scales revert to skin.

+ + +

When he wakes, his head is on Eijirou’s lap. He shifts, dazed, and realizes that Eijirou is wrapping a bandage around his head.

“I’m sorry,” Eijirou mutters. He avoids looking at Katsuki. Instead, he casts his entire focus on tending Katsuki’s head, securing the bandages. Katsuki winces when Eijirou’s fingers brush over the raw wound on his skin, and only then does Eijirou glance at him with an apologetic smile.

“You need to lay off the lizard, Ei,” Katsuki says, quietly. He’s still dizzy, still so out of it, but he needs to tell Eijirou.

“I know.”

At that moment, a noise rustles by the other end of the clearing. Eijirou bristles, and Katsuki watches as the dragon shifter snaps his head to look at who the intruder is. The lizard pads over to them with caution, its head bowed. As if on instinct, Eijirou bares his teeth at it.—Katsuki gives an exasperated sigh and reaches up to grasp Eijirou by the neck and pulls him down. Eijirou makes a startled grunt when Katsuki forces him to look at him straight in the eyes, and Katsuki’s face is so close to his, their noses brushing. When Katsuki speaks, Eijirou feels his breath on his lips. “Ei, it protected me. There’s no reason to be angry at it.”

Slowly, realization dawns on Eijirou. His expression softens, and even when the creature continues to approach, Eijirou doesn't react badly—at least not this time. “Okay,” Eijirou exhales. He's still frowning but his shoulders are no longer tense, and Katsuki grins. Eijirou's ears burn at the expression that Katsuki gives him, it's laden with satisfaction, and Eijirou hears his heartbeat hammer in his ears when Katsuki leans in to press their lips together.

Eijirou hums and kisses back, and Katsuki lets go of the hold he has around his neck.

“Okay,” Eijirou repeats against Katsuki's mouth. “Fine, I'll be nicer to the frog.”

Katsuki can't help but laugh and Eijirou laughs with him. Behind them, the large lizard makes a low, rumbling sound, —complaining about the fact that Eijirou called it a *frog*.

+ + +

When the team regroups, they notice the change in Eijirou's mood immediately. Eijirou's building a fire and the lizard is close behind, but this time Eijirou isn't upset by it. There's no scowl on his face, no tension in his shoulders. Katsuki's by the side of the clearing when Shouto approaches.

“Uh,” Shouto starts. Katsuki sees the curious expression on Shouto's face as he watches Eijirou hand the lizard a piece of fish, and even he can tell how that's a new development. “Has Eijirou realized that the lizard regards him as the alpha of the pack?”

“The pack ...?” Katsuki repeats incredulously. He wonders if Shouto thinks of them as a ‘pack’, or if he's making a joke—when it comes to the guy, he can never be sure. Shouto looks at him with a deadpan expression and Katsuki takes it as a genuine question. “He doesn't know,” Katsuki says, trying to bite back a laugh. Perhaps he should also tell the group that the lizard is, apparently, a mimic? And that the lizard's somehow picked up Eijirou's hardening?

“Should we tell him? He's nicer to the lizard, but I don't think he knows.”

There's silence for a few moments as Katsuki looks thoughtfully at the scene before them. The lizard succeeds in dropping pieces of chewed-up fish into Eijirou's lap, and Eijirou looks exasperated at it all. However, when Eijirou realizes that Katsuki's staring at him, he huffs and decides to be *nicer*—he shoots the lizard a reluctant thumbs-up.

“Nah,” Katsuki smirks. “It’s hilarious. Nobody tell him, he’ll figure it out ... eventually.”

Eijirou jumps in surprise when the lizard makes a shrill sound that could translate as a happy howl. Still grinning, Katsuki watches as Eijirou’s face morphs into bewilderment, watches him try to figure out why the lizard is circling him and trying to invade his space. It had somehow construed Eijirou taking the fish as *acceptance*. Katsuki hears Eijirou complain, “Why are you so happy I accepted this!? You’re so strange!”

Katsuki can’t help but look away, hiding his smile that could possibly be translated as fondness. He couldn’t wait for the day Eijirou *got it*.



THE DARK PRINCE'S AGGRESSIVE TRADE NEGOTIATIONS

BY SEASHOREANDMOUNTAINS

The man with the bird's head walked carefully on the open road. Trees lined the road, and a gentle breeze swirled through the trees, causing his all-encompassing cloak to ruffle. There was no one else around the man, and he had nothing with him save a horse towing a cart. It was not the first time, and hopefully not the last, that he, the prince of the Kingdom of Darkness, would be sent as a token of good faith.

Not that the citizens would let their beloved prince go unguarded though. But if he had a guard, it would seem like they did not trust the people above.

Which they did not, but that was another thing. He had to put up the APPEARANCE of being unconcerned.

Hagakure was there for that.

"You're brooding again!" Hagakure said by his ear. He didn't glance aside at her. There would be nothing there. She was permanently invisible.

"I must uphold appearances," he responded. "There should be spies on the road and the prince of the Kingdom of Darkness talking to himself would not mean good things for the upcoming negotiations."

"Well you COULD have brought someone else with you." Hagakure reminded him. "Someone else would make it less suspicious when you talk out loud."

"And would be easier to use against me when they seek hostages," he replied. "You are the spymaster. Shouldn't you be aware of these things?"

"I am, but I'm the one who's supposed to be paranoid and it's your fifth trip," Hagakure reminded him. If they weren't walking—and he didn't have a bird head—she would have tried to push him into a smile. "You can relax a bit."

"I am the prince, I can never relax." Tokoyami said in an unchanging tone of seriousness. Hagakure sighed.

"Whatever," she replied and he could hear her get up on the cart. The horse, Tsukuyomi, flicked its tail but otherwise did not react. "I'll keep an eye out for trouble back here..."

Tokoyami said nothing and the cart continued on its way.

Sometime later they arrived in the main town of the Kingdom of Uravity. Tokoyami glanced around at the other carts that gave him a wide berth. The main export of the kingdom, rice, was being carried in a lot of those carts. Everyone there looked human enough, but they all were pointedly ignoring him. He could hear Hagakure though, sitting in his cart, waiting. Watching. Silent.

When they came to the gate, a guard looked him over.

"I am Tokoyami, the dark prince. Here to meet with your princess," Tokoyami said royally as he handed over the papers. Or as royally as he could. The fact remained he had traveled on the road for some time and there was only so much preening you could do while walking on a dirt road.

"Understood," the guard said as he looked over the papers, stamped them, then gave them back. "The royal stables are on the right when you enter. Someone there can help you."

Tokoyami nodded and walked forward, leading his horse and cart behind him.

"I'm here," Hagakure whispered from on top of Tsukoyomi. Anything else she said was washed away in the cacophony of noise from the city ahead.

The people of Uravity were human-looking. At least from what Tokoyami always saw. Most had some sort of special ability but what it could be was... unknown. At least from a glance. Tokoyami's eyes roved over the people in stalls who were gathered around fresh fruit or new spices. Others were eating at restaurants or 'shooting the breeze' as they said. People were still giving Tokoyami a wide berth, but with the number of people present in the area, people were too busy looking for something specific to notice the man with the bird head. And even with Tokoyami being jostled, each time was more of an accident than on purpose.

Soon enough they reached the stable and Hagakure silently slipped off Tsukuyomi as Tokoyami walked over to greet the stable hand. Tokoyami knew the route well enough. She watched as he made a full accounting with the stable hand, and then they both went up, with him lingering a bit so she could sneak by doors.

It was not his first time out in the world, after all. And it was not his first time to the Kingdom of Uravity. The castle's floating candles were as always a wonder to behold and there were few who could resist the deep carpets that lined the hallways and rooms, a symbol of wealth that rumor had it extended to the servants quarters. The castle's stone interiors were cleaned of any smoke from the candles, leaving the insides spotless with banners of pink and white the main spots of light in the halls. All in all, something very different from his own home.

As he and Hagakure made their way deeper into the castle, more and more servants recognized him and bowed out of his way. Except for one, her guard.

“Sir Iida.” Tokoyami bowed. “Does Queen Uravity wish to see me immediately or shall I wash up first?”

“You can wash up.” Iida said, in his standard clipped tones. Tokoyami nodded.

“The usual rooms?” He asked. Iida nodded.

So off Tokoyami (and Hagakure) went. Hagakure moved as quietly as she could, off the carpets. After all, any footprints appearing on the carpets were suspicious and, to the queen’s knowledge, Tokoyami came alone.

However, as they got close to their usual room, there was a commotion behind them. Tokoyami turned and saw guards rushing him.

“Want me—”

“Wait.” he whispered at the empty air. A tap on his shoulder to say she was there, a specific cadence on the floor, and then the guards rushed Tokoyami.

“What is it?” he asked, drawing himself up to his full height. The cloak he wore ruffled slightly, as if caught in a nonexistent wind.

“There’s been an attack,” Iida said as he walked through the rank and file of soldiers who were keeping the prince at bay. He narrowed his eyes.

“Why am I being held at sword point,” Tokoyami growled.

“Whoever it was, used a power like those that the dark kingdom is rumored to use,” Iida replied. “Take him into the hall!” Tokoyami did not fight against the soldiers who grabbed him, except to snap at those who pulled at his head, not realizing how painful it was to have feathers pulled from him. He was a prince, he would act as if they were giving him the respect that he deserved, no matter how pushy the guards were.

No one noticed the extra set of footsteps, except Tokoyami.

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Queen Ochako was a fair and wise queen, who was currently levitating the book she was reading so she took a sip of her tea.

“Queen Ochako!” Iida shouted as he walked towards her, the guards carrying Tokoyami along. He stayed upright and solid, as any prince of the Dark Kingdom would act. “We have retrieved the suspect.”

There was a tap on Tokoyami's right shoulder.

"Oh?" Queen Ochako tilted her head. "What suspect? That looks like the prince I was expecting earlier. In fact, it was reported to me he had arrived in the city rather recently." She glanced at Tokoyami again. "A little too recently. I think he's still wearing his traveling clothes."

"Yes, well." Iida cleared his throat. Tokoyami did not look at him, and instead stared at Ochako, who looked back.

"We are aware of his magic ability of Dark Shadow," Iida said. "And after he arrived on our land, Dark Shadow attacked a group of shops and caused damage to the main square, in addition to scaring several of your subjects and in the chaos causing various injuries and more destruction."

"Thank you," she said as she stood up, her pink, white, and gold dress looking radiant. "You can let him go," she told the guards. "And you can leave us. We have much to discuss."

"But—" one of the guards said. She glared at him, and he retreated.

"Thank you, your majesty." Tokoyami bowed, as soon as they got their hands off him. "I do not know what has happened—"

"And you were in the castle the whole time." She finished.

"Well, yes." Tokoyami admitted. "How did you—"

"I have servants everywhere, and you stick out," she reminded him, tapping the side of her face. Tokoyami reflexively reached up and touched his beak. "I already had reports that you went straight to the stables, and then into the castle from there. After that, there was no way for you to leave without people noticing."

In Iida's defense, he looked a bit ashamed.

"Please accept my apologies," he said as he bowed to Tokoyami. "I—" He stopped as Tokoyami raised his hand.

"I understand my power is rather unique and you would rather be safe. Though I'm unsure why to be safe you would bring me to your queen."

"Under normal circumstances, I'd be surrounded by my guards, and I can take care of myself," the queen said. She stood up off her throne and began to walk down towards Tokoyami. "I'm sorry our new trade negotiations went off on the wrong foot."

"If I was a different prince, I would make sure my kingdom received... reparations in the form of a very beneficial deal," Tokoyami replied, the faintest grin on his face. He felt Hagakure tap him in annoyance. She wanted to say something, he knew that. She did like to talk, but without knowing the subject of what she wanted to say, it may not be the best idea. He gave the barest shake of his head 'no'. Hagakure was an ace in the hole. No use revealing his cards now.

"How about we start making up for the mix up with dinner?" the queen replied.

"Your majesty." Tokoyami gave a bow. "I have yet to freshen up. I do not think you want to eat with a prince, heavy with dust from travel."

Queen Ochako gave a small giggle and dismissed Tokoyami. Her knight stayed by her.

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The hot steam that filled the room left an odd gap where Hagakure would be. In this case, she was sitting on the stone bench in the bathroom. There was a tub in the middle, large enough for someone to submerge their whole selves in, and it was topped off with scented oils.

However Tokoyami's bird head was covered with feathers that did not work well wet. And as soaking in the water took the dust from the road off of him, he also used his freshly washed hands to preen the feathers on his head.

"What do you think?" he asked Hagakure. The moving steam by the bench suggested she had moved herself to lay down on top of it.

"We'll see how Queen Ochako works," she said after a moment. "This is either a ploy to butter us up or an assassination attempt." She appeared to shrug. "Before you start arguing against me, I am your bodyguard and spymaster. I'm supposed to be paranoid."

"Fair enough. But both the queen and I know this is the start of trade agreements is really an attempt to bridge the gap between the Dark Kingdom and the surface world. Not to mention, the Dark Kingdom has the ore that many places need. And we need more foodstuffs, like that rice. If we establish unique trade with her, the kingdom would become a powerhouse. Or even if she is just the first one we deal with before making deals with other kingdoms, it looks favorably on her," Tokoyami replied as he finished preening. "Can you turn around? I'm going to finish with this bath."

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Sometime later, Tokoyami (and Hagakure) were led to the dinner table where the queen sat to eat, Iida next to and behind her, and only a few servants around. She had apparently waited for him, the food being brought to the table as he entered the room.

“Thank you again for your patience,” she said as she rose to greet Tokoyami. Hagakure tapped his shoulder then grew silent. He assumed she had gone to a corner to hide and watch. He’d try to sneak food for her later.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” he replied as the pottage was put in front of him. “Shall we discuss business or something else?”

“A bit of both,” she said. “I think I know who caused the ruckus today.” While she did not have any of her utensils levitate, Tokoyami briefly wished for her power. Dark Shadow was powerful, but the ability to levitate his cups to be easier to drink was something he did want.

“And who was that?” he asked, eating the pottage.

“Neito Monoma,” she replied. “He has a copying quirk and dislikes our kingdom interacting with any other kingdom.”

“And I stick out,” Tokoyami filled in. She made a movement similar to ‘You said it, not me.’ “So, what do you want me to do?”

“I thought we could team up and face him together,” the queen said in a very proper manner.

“Oh?” Tokoyami looked up and over at the queen. She gave a large grin, one that was not echoed by her guard behind her.

“Let’s go on a walk, Prince Tokoyami,” she said as she stood up. “I want to see the stars.”

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“It’s easier to talk outside anyways,” she said later. The cold wind pulled at her dress and Tokoyami’s feathers, “This is something I would like to deal with myself, but I think we could work together. All four of us.”

“Four?” Tokoyami turned towards her. “What do you mean, four?”

“Your invisible guard.” She nodded to the air behind Tokoyami’s shoulder. “I can see their breath. It does get cold here at night.”

“Dang it!” Hagakure said. “My prince?”

From underneath Tokoyami’s cloak, he began to pull out various clothing items for Hagakure. As she began to put them on, lida turned bright red and turned around.

“She’s always invisible?” Ochako asked. Tokoyami nodded.

“She’s my bodyguard,” he half-lied. She gave a nod.

"It's a good cover for a bodyguard. I had my bodyguard teach me how to fight." Ochako moved into a fighting stance and made a few moves. "I'm a queen. I'm a target. Better to know something than to be kidnapped or killed because I couldn't throw a punch!" She gave an unladylike grin and a thumbs up. Tokoyami hid his smile, and let Dark Shadow come out. This twisted shadow of his, a power granted to the royalty of the Dark Kingdom, stretched as it spread out over the shadowy battlements.

"So, just the four of us shall catch Monoma?" Iida asked, eyeing where the floating breeches and shirt stood.

"Do you doubt the fact I have a plan, my knight?" Ochako asked. "We will only need the four of us to do this."

"Well, it will be hard for him to resist," Hagakure added in. Tokoyami glanced back and saw she had moved so she was sitting on a space in the battlements now. "The queen and the person he hates is there, and with just one guard? He'll come."

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Queen Ochako had quite the way with her castle. By the time Tokoyami came down to breakfast the next morning, just enough people were buzzing about the secret picnic that would be chaperoned by Iida as a way to covertly cover trade negotiations. Apparently the attack yesterday had caused some fraying and Ochako was hoping privacy could cover up... whatever she was planning to get them back on track. Some people suggested it was a romantic rendezvous to, er, encourage aggressive negotiations. Others were suggesting Iida would kill Tokoyami. There were a few suggestions that she wanted to escape a spy in the castle who served the Kingdom of Deku. Everyone else thought the rumors were stupid.

"It's not a bad strategy," Hagakure said to her prince in the very busy stable. He could see her footprints in the scattered straw. The number of horses and the chatter of squires hid her voice as Tokoyami tended to his own horse. He patted Tsukuyomi as he brushed the mane.

"I'm more impressed," he admitted. "It's guaranteed to get to Monoma, but it feels natural. How often has she done this kind of thing?"

"More often than I would like," Iida said as he came to the stall where Tokoyami stood. He awkwardly began to pat Tsukuyomi. Said horse glared at him and Iida quickly stopped. "She likes to hide among her subjects."

"What use is a queen if she doesn't know what they think?" A perky voice said behind them. They all turned and saw her standing there, the food floating behind her. "Ready to go?"

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Tokoyami could feel Hagakure clinging to him as they rode through the forest. Queen Ochako led along a well-trod route as Iida tried to make small talk as he walked alongside them.

"Did you know that our kingdom's main export is rice, Prince Tokoyami?" he asked in a bit too loud of a voice. Tokoyami rubbed his hand on the bridle strap of his horse.

"Yes, Sir Iida," he replied in a restrained voice. Hagakure tapped him on his back. "Beautiful day for a ride, your majesty?" he asked in the prearranged signal. He watched as she gave a slight nod in front of him. Something rustled in the trees and Tokoyami felt Hagakure slip off of the horse.

"No, because you will face... ME!" A male voice said from the center of the road. Tokoyami looked around and saw an utterly normal male human. The man in question gave a laugh, his arms up in a gesture of superiority. "MONOMA!" He laughed some more and glanced at the four together. "My plan did not work, apparently."

"Found you!" Ochako pointed at him. "What are you doing?"

"I don't know WHY you are dealing with people from other kingdoms," Monoma said as he began to pace. "We are self-sufficient! WE ARE BETTER! What is HE bringing to the table." Monoma pointed at Tokoyami, who got off his horse as Monoma continued to rant. Iida got in front of his queen, his posture tensed as if to attack. "You are no good as Queen."

"How dare you insult your queen like that!" Tokoyami shouted. "If you are doing this for her, what use is it if you insult her and attack her?"

"She's weak. You are all weak," Monoma said. "Our Kingdom, MY kingdom will be the greatest ever! And I can prove it, once I kill you."

"I believe that was a threat," Ochako said. "Sir Iida, I give you permission to attack."

"Gladly," Iida said. "He has threatened and insulted you, my queen." He pulled a knife out from a scabbard by his waist.

Iida sprang at Monoma, quick and agile, and a coiled spring. Or even faster. Tokoyami whispered Dark Shadow at the same time, and his shadow sprang up, threatening, wary, ready to attack in case Iida failed.

Iida did. He missed Monoma by a few inches and before he could turn around, Monoma grabbed some of Iida's hair, and then punched Iida in the face. It was faster than what Tokoyami could track with his eyes and Iida fell back over the road and hit his head on a tree. He staggered as he got up, and leaned on the tree as he slowly shook his head. And then he held his head in both hands and dropped to his knees, body shaking as if crying.

“My ability, you three,” Monoma said, practically vibrating, “Is the ability to absorb the abilities of others once I touch their hair.” He stretched. “It may only be for a short time, but in that time, with super-speed?” Monoma began to flit around the ring, faster than Tokoyami could follow him. “I think I could kill all of you.” Monoma flipped a knife over in his hands.

“Now,” Monoma said as he turned to face Tokoyami. “Let’s see what I can do to stop you. I’ll get the queen next and we can defend all those who try to weaken our kingdom!”

Monoma used Iida’s speed to rush at Tokoyami. Dark Shadow began to wrap around Tokoyami, making him look like the demons that people accused his kingdom of harboring. Dark Shadow was ready to defend.

And then five feet in front of Tokoyami, Monoma ran into something that caused his feet to kick out under from him, almost snapping his neck as the momentum that carried him that far was suddenly arrested only at his neck.

“Ooow.” he croaked. He began to rub his throat as he struggled to breathe. “It hurts.”

Ochako, with a grace that came only with rulers, slid off her horse, walked over, and tapped him on the shoulder. Monoma, still recovering from Hagakure clotheslining him, didn’t realize that he was now levitating a few feet above the ground. Iida, suddenly cured, walked over and handed his queen a rope as Dark Shadow receded. As Ochako tied up Monoma, Tokoyami went over to give Hagakure her clothes back.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to pull that trick again,” she sighed. “It was great teaming up with you though!”

“Thank you for your great assistance, Miss Hagakure,” Iida said, very professionally. Tokoyami knew she was probably waving, but as she was invisible... “It was an excellent plan.”

Tokoyami grinned for her as he began to pull her clothes from his cloak again. She grabbed them and started to put them on.

“Thanks!” she said cheerily. “Sir Iida, would you like some company escorting Mr. Traitor back to jail?”

“I—” Iida froze.

“Oh, go ahead, Tenya,” Ochako said. “We’ll be right behind you.” She gave a grin and looked over at Tokoyami. “With Monoma under arrest, we can start our negotiations as on a blank slate.”

“I look forward to it,” Tokoyami said as he walked back to Tsukuyomi. “I think that our work together will be beneficial to both kingdoms.”



THE TALE OF THE FOUNDING OF THE LEAGUE OF VILLAINS

BY SANATORIA

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I. THE LOYAL SERVANT

+ + +

It was with a small sigh that Kurogiri surveyed the aftermath of Tomura's fit. Scattered on, around, and, somehow, even under the long mahogany table where Tomura was currently lounging was still settling cinder-grey dust. Kurogiri set down the platter of fruit he had brought—occasionally Tomura would be amenable to eating at least a grape or two—and gave the young lord a look.

"That was your last servant, Tomura."

Tomura scowled harder but didn't look away from the playing cards he was balancing. "Just hire more," he said. Hunched over and cross-legged on his chair, in his rumpled black tunic and equally dark trousers, he hardly looked the part of the wealthy lord he was meant to be.

That wealth—left to Tomura by his guardian, and Kurogiri's master, All For One—was the only reason Kurogiri was still able to keep their hearths burning. Tomura's unfortunate habit of disintegrating servants every few weeks, however, was not making Kurogiri's job any easier.

"We cannot hire new servants if there are none to hire, Tomura. Word has spread of your ability. And your predilection for using it on those who displease you."

Tomura stopped, turning to his castellan. "It's not my fault they're incompetent," he snapped, curling five fingers around a queen of hearts. Instantly, the card crumbled, dust seeping through his fist onto the tabletop.

"And what did"—Kurogiri took a moment to recall the servant's name—"Nicholas do?" Nicholas had been one of the more capable servants; he wouldn't have lasted so long as to be the last servant standing otherwise.

"He ruined my house of cards." Tomura narrowed his eyes, as if daring Kurogiri to question his judgement in killing a servant for knocking down playing cards.

There was a beat of silence, and then Kurogiri said, "Tomura, perhaps it's time I found you some more... unconventional servants."

Tomura frowned, his head askew and propped up on one pale hand. "What?"

"Servants of the sort All For One would have approved of, before his untimely passing."

Tomura's face darkened. "Oh. That." With a screech of his chair, he stood up. "Do whatever you want. I don't care." And he strode out the room, leaving Kurogiri alone with the table cluttered with cards, a half-empty wine glass, untouched fruit, and dust. Dust, everywhere.

With another quiet sigh, Kurogiri left to fetch a broomstick.

+ + +

II. THE SPLINTERED MAN

+ + +

Tomura stared.

"Who the hell is he?"

There was some sort of filthy vagrant standing in front of him in the great hall. Dishevelled blond hair, ragged clothing, and a scar running down the middle of his forehead that Tomura wondered might be related to the dead look in the man's sunken eyes.

The man shuffled and made a short bow. "Name's Bubaigawara Jin," he said, voice gruff. "Honoured to meet you, your lordship."

"Mister Bubaigawara is here hoping to find work as a servant," Kurogiri quickly explained, before Tomura could immediately tell the man to fuck off.

Tomura turned to Kurogiri, face darkening. "You invited him in here?" One hand moved up to his neck, an itch already blooming.

"Please give it some consideration, Tomura. He was recommended by Giran."

"That old bastard recommended him. Really." Tomura gave Bubaigawara a once-over. He'd thought Giran had better taste than whatever random bumpkin happened to be by the side of the road, but whatever. Actually, it made sense. Giran was shifty as fuck.

Bubaigawara twitched. “What did you say about Giran?” he said indignantly. He doubled over and clutched his head. “*No, Giran doesn’t care about us!*” he burst, his voice suddenly higher and reedier.

Tomura’s face twisted. “What the hell is your problem?” He didn’t have time for clowns, or whatever this nutcase was that Giran and Kurogiri somehow thought would be qualified to help upkeep the castle.

“Sorry—*no I’m not!*—shit, I can’t go for extended periods without—” Bubaigawara shoved a hand into his trouser pockets and pulled out something brown and wrinkled. A paper bag. Fumbling, he smoothed it open and yanked it down over his head. It had two ripped holes, and Bubaigawara’s eyes blinked out of them. He let out a big sigh, his voice higher again.

“Ahh. That’s better. Much, much better.” This time, his bow was comically deep, and he straightened back up like a ruler. “Sorry about that, your lordship. Unless my face is covered, my mind splits like a log of wood, y’see.”

Tomura stared at the madman in front of him with distaste, but stepped forwards and began to walk in a loose circle around him, eyes sharp and analyzing. He noted the way Bubaigawara seemed completely at ease, arms loose at his sides, unworried about Tomura standing right behind him.

“What makes you think you have what it takes to join this castle’s staff?” Tomura demanded.

“I’m a jack of all trades, your lordship!” Bubaigawara craned his neck over so he could follow Tomura’s movement. He flexed one arm and patted his biceps. “Worked in mines, smitheries, castles, kitchens, you name it. Once cleaned out a whole barn all by myself in one day!”

Tomura scoffed. “That’s not possible.”

“Well,” Bubaigawara said, voice chipper, “I work twice as fast as most people!” His posture shifted. “*I work at half the speed!*”

Tomura finished one final circle and came back to a stop in front of Bubaigawara. He tilted his head back. And in spite of himself—

“You’ll work here full time. Kurogiri will brief you on your duties.”

Whatever. Why not? Tomura would just disintegrate him if he proved useless. But at least Bubaigawara wasn’t a cowering mess like everyone else who’d heard of Tomura’s ability.

He couldn’t exactly see Bubaigawara’s face underneath the paper bag, but he could physically feel the grinning happiness that shone out of the newly minted servant like too-bright rays of sun. “Thank you, thank you!” the man gushed. He did a little dance on the spot. Tomura started to regret his decision.

“Bubaigawara.”

“Yes? My lord?”

“First. Don’t call me that. Second. Don’t *act. Like that.*”

Bubaigawara gave a salute. “Got it, boss! Oh, by the way, boss—”

Tomura was already turning around to leave. “*What is it?*”

“My last name’s really a handful, so...” Bubaigawara scratched the back of his head with over-exaggerated sheepishness, the paper rustling.

“Call me Twice!”

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III. THE PHYSICIAN'S DAUGHTER

+ + +

Twice was—somehow—a capable servant. Not that Tomura cared to check up on what he did, but the decrease in the number of cobwebs and increase in the number of lighted hearths seemed to indicate something, at least. He was a lunatic, but he stayed out of Tomura’s way and got things done.

But then Tomura walked into the dining hall on one of the rare occasions when he decided to show up for dinner, and saw Twice standing by the head of the table with a teenage girl, both of them with their hands clasped in front of them. She had a cheery smile on her face, and Tomura could only assume that the same expression was mirrored on Twice’s.

Tomura stopped dead in his tracks. “*Twice,*” he said dangerously. A hand moved upwards to scratch at his neck. “Explain.”

“Shigaraki, this is Toga, Toga Himiko! Toga, Shigaraki!” Twice didn’t seem daunted by Tomura’s poor mood. “I met her at the market when I was buying supplies, she tried to kill me! She’s such a great fighter, she sucks at fighting,” Twice gushed, hands cupping his cheeks as he looked down at the girl, who flashed a dazzling smile up in turn. Her cheeks were flushed. “She’s super nice! She’s evil! You should bring her on the staff, Shigaraki!”

“This isn’t a damn orphanage,” Tomura snapped, fingers itching. “And I already have workers. Unless you want me to end your contract early.”

Twice lifted his hands placatingly. “Ah, hear her out, hear her out!” He clasped his hands together. “Pleaseeeee?”

Tomura narrowed his eyes. He stalked to his seat at the head of the table—Twice and the new girl scooting out of his way—and draped himself sidelong across the chair, one leg swinging.

“Why,” he said, “do you want to work here?”

Toga beamed. “I’m from way up north! I was the physician’s daughter, but I ran away because my father wouldn’t let me play with his knives. But I’m really good with them, see?” She plucked two thin blades out of nowhere and twirled them around on her hands. “I’ve been travelling around. They call me the Red Ripper.”

Tomura stopped swinging his leg. “*You’re* the Red Ripper?” he said, voice flat.

Toga bobbed her head.

Commonfolk always liked to gossip about the supposed horrors that hid in their midst, but the Red Ripper had been one of the more popular, believable tales. Not that Tomura saw anything particularly frightening in a token serial killer.

But it was interesting. And Tomura was starting to realize he preferred interesting servants over dull ones.

“I wanna work here because it’s hard living on the run, and I hate having to hide who I am and the things I wanna do.” Toga sheathed her knives up her sleeves, and smiled. She seemed to do that a lot. “But I heard about you, Tomura. I heard you don’t mind bad things, ‘cause you’re a little bad yourself.”

It was simplistic—childish—but something in Toga’s words resonated with Tomura. Before All For One had taken Tomura in, he had had nothing. Had no one. All because he hadn’t put on a mask, had let the kingdom see him, plain and clear—and the kingdom had decided they didn’t like what they had seen.

But now he was the one with the castle and the lands and the fancy title, and he’d do whatever the fuck he wanted, the whole world be damned.

Hire a serial killer? Something normal people would be opposed to. Probably.

Tomura tapped his fingers on his knee in a slow rhythm. “How do I know you won’t kill me?”

The psychopath burst out into giggles, one hand over her mouth. “I wouldn’t kill you, silly! I wanna *work* for you!”

Tomura eyed her.

Footsteps sounded from the hallway, and Kurogiri stepped out into the dining hall carrying a silver platter.

He stopped. “Tomura, who is this...?”

“Kurogiri,” Tomura interrupted. “We have a new hire.”

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IV. THE CIRCUS PERFORMER

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Tomura fucking hated circuses. No, he hated going outside the castle grounds in general. But this—this was torture. He couldn't remember why the hell he had agreed to it.

First of all, the smell of sweat and shit pervaded the air so thick that Tomura could almost taste it. Secondly, streamers, stalls, tents, and bright colours were everywhere, so garish and tasteless that he just wanted to decay it all. The only single positive he could see was that although people shoved and jostled and yelled, they left a wide berth of space around him, Twice, and Toga. Earlier, one man had bumped into him and snapped out an insult, but after Tomura had grabbed ahold of his neck and watched his skin peel off, the crowd around him had thinned considerably.

"Oh oh oh," Toga gasped, jumping up and down on the spot in front of a sign leading to a large tent. "A knife-thrower! Can we go see, Tomura? *Pleaseeeeeee?*"

"We found the knife tent!" Twice cheered.

Tomura was going to kill Kurogiri for leaving them here for so long. He was supposed to be back by now. Tomura wanted to go back. Now.

"I'm *never doing this again*," Tomura growled.

Toga whooped, skipped behind Twice, and jumped up onto his shoulders as he bent down.

They probably made for an odd sight as they walked inside: Lord Shigaraki Tomura, whose public appearances were so rare some doubted his existence, a burly man with a brown paper bag over his head, and a teenage girl riding happily on his shoulders.

After a while, all three of them reached a general consensus that the knife-thrower was shit. The throwing distance was embarrassingly small, and the targets huge—the only highlight had been when the knife-thrower accidentally nicked the arm of his human target and blood spurted everywhere. The tent had erupted with boos and disdain. Twice had gasped. Tomura had laughed. Toga had seemed caught between booing and salivating.

Now a new knife-thrower was on the stage doing more idiotic tricks—at least his aim was tolerable—Toga was shouting out much more interesting suggestions, and Twice was cheering and booing on her ideas.

The hair on Tomura's nape tingled. He frowned, tensed. Turned around.

The man standing behind him with a knife raised froze, then opened his mouth in a silent battle cry and brought his hand down.

Tomura ducked and grabbed the man's face, leaving him to soundlessly disintegrate, then hissed as he saw another man sneaking up behind Twice and Toga. He shoved Twice to the side and ducked as another knife came whistling out of the air. It buried itself into the shoulder of the man in front of him, who started screaming. Toga cried out as she fell off Twice's shoulders and landed on the ground with a thump.

For a brief moment, the crowd hushed as the series of events registered in their brains. Then the tent exploded into noise and action as everyone fled for the exits.

Tomura yanked the knife intended for him out of the man's shoulder and handed it to Toga. She slashed the ankle of her attacker and stabbed his throat as Twice disarmed him.

"This is why we shouldn't have come," Tomura snapped.

They stood back to back in the tent as a few more attackers melted out of the frantic crowd. Toga had a mad grin on her face. "But *Tomura*, this is even more fun than the knife-throwing show!"

"Toga's a way better knife-thrower than those wannabes," Twice agreed, knifing an attacker of his own.

Tomura seethed. He grabbed one of the non-dead attackers on the ground by the neck with four fingers.

"Who are you, and why the fuck are you getting in our way?"

"You..." the man panted, blood probably filling up his lungs. "You're a monster. Evil. You and All For One have brought us nothing but death and destruction." He coughed. "And word on the street," he said, eyes flicking to Toga, "is that you've taken the Red Ripper under your wing, too."

Tomura laughed, letting himself sound mad and wild.

"I don't give a shit what the word on the street is," he spit. He raised his voice, loud enough so that his voice would carry throughout the entire tent. "I don't care what you *do*, or *think*, as long as you people *stay out of my way*."

He stood up, dragging the attacker up by the neck, and the movement in the tent stuttered to a halt, people unsure of what to do.

"Well. I *didn't* care." Tomura grinned, no humour in it, choking the man in a vise-like grip. "Because now you fuckers are in my way. What's that saying again? Oh, right. Turnabout is fair play," he sing-songed. He dug the final finger down into the man's neck and let the decaying sack of organs drop to the ground.

The tent hushed.

“Wowee!” Twice started clapping enthusiastically. “Great speech, boss! *Sounded shitty!*”

Toga’s eyes glittered as bright as her grin. She clapped as well. “I knew you’d finally get off your lazy butt, Tomura.”

Tomura glared at them.

From behind them, a third person started clapping. Tomura turned, a scowl on his face. When would the surprises end?

“Bravo, bravo!” the new knife-thrower cried from the stage, face hidden behind a painted mask. “I must say, your performance was of a far higher caliber than mine.”

The masked circus performer hopped off the stage and approached Tomura. He bowed with a flourish.

“It’s an honour to meet you, Lord Shigaraki Tomura. My name is Mr. Compress. May I inquire as to the application process for entering into your service?”

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V. THE RUNAWAY PRINCE

+ + +

It was the middle of the night when Tomura heard a knocking sound coming from the main gates. He ignored it the first two times. Then the knocking came a third time.

He cursed to himself and stood up, the chair screeching across the flagstones. He’d finish the round of spider solitaire later.

He grabbed a torch on his way to the entrance, annoyed. Who the fuck was up this early banging on people’s doors?

The person banged on the doors again, and Tomura hissed expletives under his breath. He walked the rest of the way over and slid open the door hatch to reveal—nothing. He couldn’t see shit with how dark it was out, and how bright the torch by his face was.

“Fuck off,” he said instead, and slammed the hatch shut.

“I heard about your little speech at the travelling troupe last month,” came a calm, muffled voice. “I think you’re going to want to hear me out.”

Tomura narrowed his eyes at the door hatch.

He reopened it.

“Mind letting me in?” the asshole said. “It’s rude to leave strangers out in the cold.”

“It’s rude to bang on people’s gates in the middle of the fucking night.”

He heard a scoff. “Fine,” the asshole said. “My name is Dabi, and I liked your mission statement of destroying conventional society. I think I’ll be an asset to your little team or whatever it is you have going on, and if you let me in, I’ll show you how.”

Tomura couldn’t find any obvious faults in Dabi’s introduction besides the rudeness, and his presentation was of potential interest, so he glowered into the darkness, slid the hatch back shut, and lifted the latch on the door.

He stepped back, and a tall, lanky figure slid through the gates, barely silhouetted by the torchlight.

Tomura squinted, irritated. “Take a damn torch.” He kicked the gates shut. This “Dabi” had shit for manners. The asshole lifted a torch from a sconce by the gates.

Then a dagger whizzed past him and embedded itself an inch above Dabi’s head in the wooden gate.

“The hell—” Dabi tensed, eyes flicking around the hall as he lifted his torch higher. For the first time, Tomura noticed the swathes of purple, scabbing skin that covered half the asshole’s face. Interesting.

“*Helloooo*,” called a familiar, lilting voice from the darkness of the second-floor balcony. “My name’s Toga! Nice to meet you, Dabi.”

“And I’m the one-and-only Twice! We heard you knocking away and decided to come see for ourselves.”

“They were quite worried about you, Shigaraki.” Compress. “It’s not wise to let in strangers during these witching hours.”

“Tomura, you agreed you would start sleeping at more reasonable hours,” Kurogiri added, sounding genuinely distressed.

“You came, too,” Tomura said flatly. He had thought his castellan was the most reasonable of the group. “I can handle this myself. *This is my castle.*”

“We’re light sleepers,” Kurogiri said, sounding embarrassed despite himself.

Dabi raised an eyebrow. “Loyal bunch you got here,” he commented.

“Thanks,” Twice chirped. *“Fuck you!”*

Dabi’s face wrinkled before he turned back to Tomura. “Word spreads fast,” he said. “All For One is dead, they say. His presence was the only thing keeping enemies away from your land. You do know that, right? The Eight Precepts are milling around the nearby villages. There’s talk of heroes coming to ‘liberate’ the people.” He spread his arms out. “You have no army, no weapons... do you really even have a direction?”

Tomura’s face darkened. “If you’re just here to insult me,” he warned in a dangerous voice.

“I’m just saying... I think you could use a clearer goal for your ragtag group of ‘servants’, rather than cooping yourselves up in a castle all day. And I have an idea of what that goal could be.” Dabi tapped his chin. “Oh, and I want to join the team, of course.”

Tomura curled his lip. “And what exactly are these assets you said you have?”

Dabi paused. “Ah, that’s right.” He smirked, placing the torch he was holding back on its scone, then opened his hand out in front of him.

His hand lit up in blue flames.

Tomura’s eyes widened just a fraction.

“You’re—” Kurogiri said suddenly, shock colouring his voice.

Dabi smiled. “Dabi.”

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VI. THE LOST SOLDIER

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Two days later, someone started banging on the front gates.

“Again?” Twice grouched from the halls.

“Hey, at least it’s daytime, you big whiner.” Toga giggled. “I wonder who it is!”

Tomura glared at the gates, from over the pages of his book on strategy. He couldn’t be bothered to get up from his armchair. “Toga, go answer it.”

“Okie dokes!” she called, skipping over.

Tomura went back to his book.

“Oh. Hello? Who’re you?” He heard the gates creak open.

“Spinner, name’s Spinner... I deserted from the Todoroki armies. I, I’ve always hated them and their heroes—not heroes, not real heroes—sorry, out of breath, one second—”

Tomura put his book down and furrowed his brows at the figure in the gateway. Some green, lizard-looking soldier. One of those people born with a physical mutation, then. He was bloody and dishevelled.

“Right, so—I heard about Lord Tomura’s declaration, and I completely agree with your ways of thinking—reminds me of Stain, how he fought against traditional hero society. I’m here to join. But the thing is—the *heroes* heard about the declaration, too, and the Todorokis have organized a pre-emptive attack on your castle.”

What the hell?

“*When?*” Tomura demanded, sitting up, book long forgotten.

Spinner looked over, as if just now noticing Tomura there. “A week? Maybe less,” he said hesitantly.

Toga looked to Tomura, her face a rare picture of unease. From the hallway, Twice took his paper bag off his head. He, too, looked grim. Compress stood beside him. Dabi was leaning on the balcony with Kurogiri, his face unreadable.

Twice broke the silence. “What’re you going to do, boss?”

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VII. THE FUTURE KING

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“I’ll destroy them,” Tomura snarled, standing up. He curled his fingers around the book on his armrest, only feeling a small bit of satisfaction when it crumbled underneath his skin.

“Tomura,” Kurogiri said, “these are not civilian villagers. These are soldiers, knights, *heroes*.”

“You can teleport, can’t you?” Tomura snapped. “I’ll destroy them all, then you can get us the hell out of here.”

“I can help with the destruction part too, idiot,” Dabi called, letting a small ball of fire burn in his palm. “Fucking up Todoroki forces? That’s why I came.”

“Me, too,” Spinner added.

Tomura frowned heavily, pacing around. He glanced at Toga, Compress, Twice. “But you three are civilians. You’re dead weight.”

Twice cocked his head to the side.

“Huh?” Toga said.

Compress pulled a small, glass marble out of his pocket. “Shigaraki, whatever would possess you to presume that?”

He snapped the fingers on his other hand, and three rabbits jumped out of his first hand.

“What the hell,” Tomura said, staring.

Toga leaned up and swiped a finger through some of the blood on Spinner’s arm.

“Hey, what the—”

She popped the finger in her mouth and beamed. Suddenly, there were two Spinners standing at the gates instead of one.

Just as suddenly, it registered in Tomura’s mind that this ability must have been how Toga managed to evade capture while on the run for so long.

Then he glanced to his other side, and beside Twice was a second Toga also standing there.

Tomura glared, not sure if his mood had just gotten worse, or better. “Why the hell did you three not tell me?” he asked sourly.

Toga glanced at Twice, who glanced at Compress, who shrugged. “It never came up in conversation, I suppose.”

Tomura plopped back down in his armchair, still glaring. After a surly pause, he spoke.

“First—we’re going to plan a counter pre-emptive attack of our own.” Now that his servants weren’t hiding useful secret abilities from him.

Compress, Twice and Spinner nodded in agreement. Dabi’s lips seemed to curve up.

“Ooooh,” Toga and the second Spinner said at the same time.

“That’s a good strategy, Tomura,” Kurogiri said approvingly.

“Second—all of you are no longer servants. You’re associates.” He stared at each and every person in the room. “If the heroes want to fight us, that makes us villains.”

Tomura let his eyes scan the room. Everyone in the room gave some form of nod or acknowledgement. Good.

“Oooh, we should give ourselves a catchy name!” Toga suggested.

“Ah.” Compress nodded. “Like a circus, or playing company.”

Twice raised his hand. “Oh oh, Team Villains? The Villainous Group? Shigaraki and Company?”

Dabi snorted, but no one else said anything.

Tomura grinned.

“The League of Villains.”





CREDITS



AMUK

Organization & Beta
Reading Mod


 @amukWrites


 @kumeko



ANIZINES

Social Media & Formatting
Mod

 @aniziness


 @anizines



DEX

Artist

Cover + Page 138


 @dextrasinestra



KOPHI

Artist

Page 3


 @snack_chan



ZARIYEN

Artist

Page 4


 @zariyenyen



HLEBETS

Artist

Page 13


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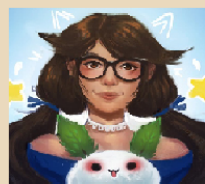


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Artist

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MYINTY

Artist

Page 20 & 21


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Artist

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Artist

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MUERPI
Artist

Page 42

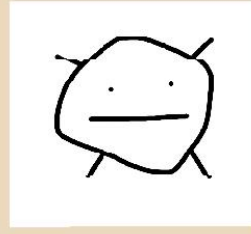
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COOP
Artist


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 @microrockets



MOUSTAWOTT
Artist

Page 53

 @moustawott



HAIKU
Artist

Page 62

 @hexagonsgalore

 @hexagonsgalore



SAEKAKU
Artist

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 @saekaku



AEOLIAN
Artist

Page 73

 @aeolianmode



MORRI
Artist

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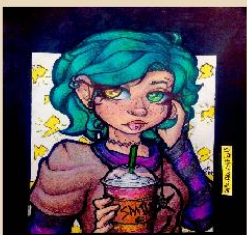
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Artist


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Artist


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YI
Artist

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 @thegreencarousel



RINJI
Artist

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 @rinjimochi



COBYFROG
Artist

Page 105

 @cobyfrog


CREDITS



PETRA B. GAMBOA

Artist

Page 114

 @petrabgamboa



AZUNSHI

Writer

Page 5


 @azunshi
 @avatarclub



LORA B

Writer

Page 15


 @lorablackmane



SHADOWWOLVEN

Writer

Page 22


 @eggymeatballs



EMBERCELICA

Writer

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 @awake-atnight



FRAPPI

Writer

Page 43

 @frappichino23
 @frappichino23



AMUK

Writer

Page 54

 @amukWrites
 @kumeko



SPADA

Writer

Page 64


 @spadablu



ERASEPURRCLOUD

Writer

Page 75 (Collab w/Morri)


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MUNCH MUFFINS

Writer

Page 84

 @munch_muffin



BLAQUE

Writer

Page 92


 @chapterblaque



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Writer

Page 97 (Collab w/Rinji)

 @red_headed_riot

CREDITS



MAPLEFUDGE

Writer

Page 106



@_maplefudge



MINA

Writer

Page 115



@madamina



SANATORIA

Writer

Page 125



@sanatoriaa